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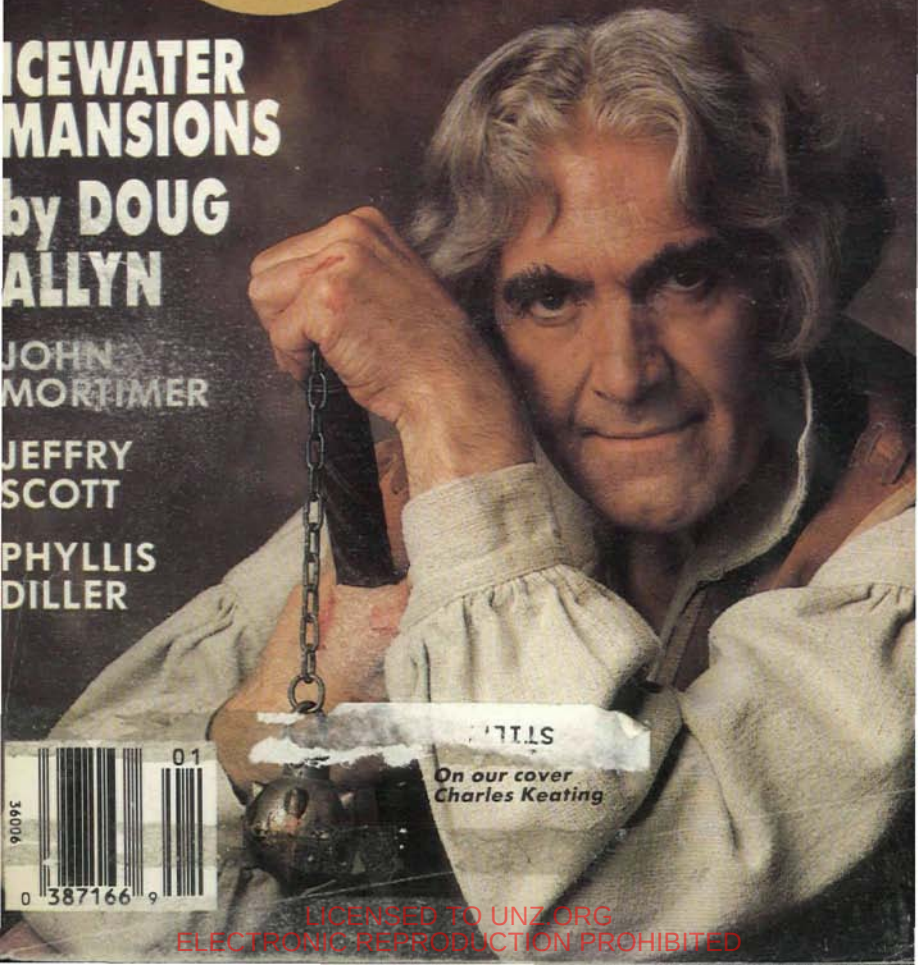

ICEWATER MANSIONS by DOUG ALLYN

JOHN MORTIMER

JEFFRY SCOTT

PHYLLIS DILLER

On our cover
Charles Keating

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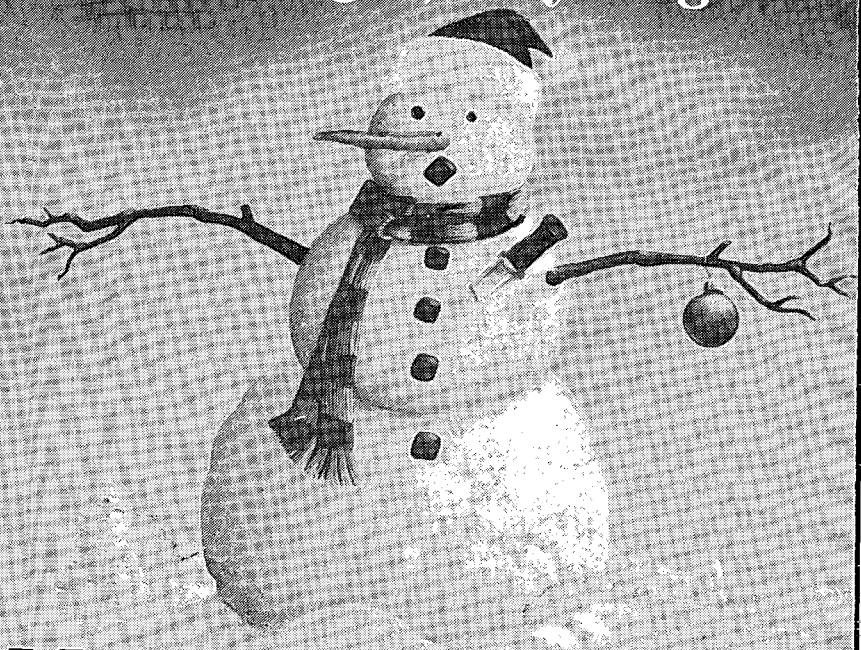

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On our cover is CHARLES KEATING
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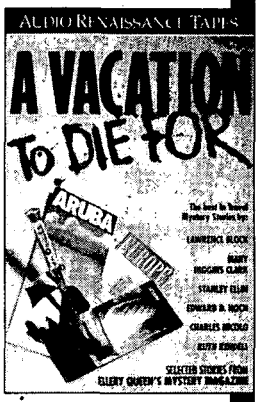

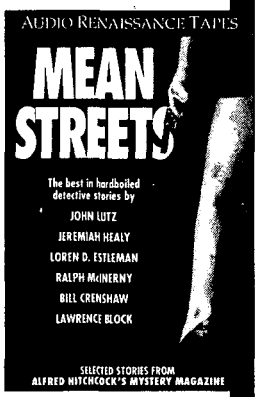

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a ***NEW*** short story by

DOUG ALLYN

The ship's clock on the bookcase showed a little after two A.M. *And yet the room was suffused with a silvery glow, bright shafts of light bleeding around the edges of the drapes. Someone was spotlighting the house from the beach. Sharply awake now, I rolled off the sofa, jerked the .45 out of its holster. Then flattened myself against the wall beside the living room window, and swept the drapes open.*

Ice. *My God. Huron Bay was a crystalline, glimmering icefield that stretched unbroken to the horizon, and probably five hundred miles north to the Canadian shore. There was no spotlight out there, only the moon, three-quarters full, beaming through scudding snow-clouds, refracted by a billion prisms, setting Lady Huron aglisten in a cloak of shattered diamonds.*

A story of cold beauty and menace from one of our most valued contributors . . .

ICEWATER MANSIONS

by DOUG ALLYN

It was a Christmas from hell. Sitting in a smoky lakefront saloon, listening to Bing Crosby gargle Jingle Bells from a jukebox that sounded like somebody'd stuffed it with Qualudes. The rummies hunched over the bar looked even sorrier than Bing sounded, working men in seedy clothes muttering to nobody about the Lions/Jets game on the TV, staring into their futures in the bottom of a beer mug. Two hard-eyed young studs in leather jackets were shooting pool beside a frost-rimed window that rattled with every gust of wind off Huron Bay.

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The bartender's beer keg of a belly was cased in a grimy white shirt taut as a sausage skin. He wore his hair slicked back like a late-show gangster, which was appropriate since he was pocketing half the cash that came across the bar. The only woman in the room was the waitress, a treetop-tall redhead in a faded Willie Nelson tee shirt and jeans. She looked a bit like Jack Palance, high cheekbones, wide mouth, large, red-knuckled hands. She was a hard worker, waiting tables, emptying ashtrays, fighting a hopeless battle with disorder. One of the hardcase pool shooters patted her bottom as she passed. She gave him a tight grin and a left hook to the ribs that nearly dropped him to his knees. He didn't touch her again.

"You ain't drinkin' your beer, bub," the bartender said, startling me. "Something wrong with it?"

"As a matter of fact, there is. The lipstick smear on the mug isn't my shade."

He grunted, pulled a greasy rag out of his hip pocket, wiped the mauve stain off the lip of my glass, and pushed it back at me, slopping suds all over the bar.

"That does it," I said. "You know, I've been in a lot of saloons in a lot of towns, but you're the rock-bottom worst bartender I've ever seen. You're not even a good thief."

"What?"

"You heard me. If you're gonna steal, don't do it in front of the customers. Put the money in the till and rip it off after you close."

"Look, Jack, you don't like the way I run this place, don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out."

"You're half right," I said, easing up off my stool, "I don't like the way you run this place. But I'm not the one who's leaving. You are. After you empty your pockets on the bar."

"I ain't emptyin' nothin'," he said, flushing dangerously. "What is this? You some kinda law?"

"Worse than that," I sighed. "Unfortunately, I'm the new owner, Brian Mitchell. Does the name ring a bell?"

"Maybe," he said, not giving an inch, "but I never seen you before, and you can't just walk in here and—"

"Give it up, Carney," the waitress said, "you know it's him. He looks enough like Mitch to be his brother."

"His son, actually," I said. "As in prodigal."

"I don't give a damn if you're his mother," the bartender said. "I ain't takin' no crap off you or anybody else. Hey guys, I got me a wise-ass here, need a little help!"

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A couple of roughnecks stood up, brightening at the prospect of a bar war, sharks tasting blood in the water. One of the pool players sauntered toward me, carrying his cue, and I suddenly remembered my father saying that if you have to fight, try to pick on people who won't kick you to death if you fall.

"Now everybody just cool out," the waitress said, intercepting the guy with the stick. "Nobody wants any trouble."

"Especially not over this joint," I said. "You know, I worked here when I was a kid, and I don't think it's been cleaned up since. But you know what I hated most? It's always dark as a bat cave in here. The harbor's only fifty yards away and you'd never know it. No view." I picked up an empty chair, hefted it a moment to check its balance, then turned and pitched it out through the front window, smashing it out into the parking lot. The December wind howled in like a rabid Rottweiler, snapping at the curtains, spraying snow around like foam flecks.

"Gentlemen," I said, picking up another chair, "the Crow's Nest is officially under new management. And as of now, we're closed for remodeling."

"Hey! Wait a minute!" the bartender yelled, outraged, but he was overruled by the wind and the rapidly falling room temperature. His cronies knew a lost cause when it blew in and they were already gulping their drinks and heading for the door. I thought the kid with the pool cue might give me trouble but the waitress said something to him and he grinned and tossed her the stick.

"Mr. Carney," I said, setting the chair aside, "I want your key and the money in your pockets on the bar and then I want you gone. Any problem with that?"

"Hell no," he said bitterly, tossing a crumpled wad of bills on the counter. "The keys are on the desk in the office. But you ain't seen the last of me, mister. You comin', Red?"

"I don't know," the waitress said, eyeing me frankly. "How about it, Mr. Mitchell? Am I fired too?"

"Depends," I said. "At the moment I need a cleaning lady a lot more than a waitress."

"I know which end of a mop is up," Red said, "but I don't do windows. Or at least not with chairs."

"Speaking of which, I guess I'd better see about a new one," I said. "Meanwhile, why don't you find that mop you mentioned."

Small northern-Michigan towns have their pluses. A dapper, cheery little Irishman from Huron Bay Hardware and Glass showed

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up within the hour, looked over the job, and said if I was willing to take a unit from stock he could have an oversized bay window installed by quitting time the next day. Try getting that kind of service in a city.

The local law was only slightly less prompt. I was taping cardboard over the hole in the window when a sheriff's department black-and-white pulled into the lot. Charlie Bauer climbed out. I vaguely recalled him from the old days, his size more than anything. He stands six-six, probably close to three hundred pounds, and looks even bigger in his bulky brown uniform. He'd gone a bit jowly, soft around the middle, but still nobody to cross, square-faced, steel-grey brush cut. He sauntered over, eyed me, the chair, and the broken glass all over the ground, then picked up the chair and carried it in with him.

"What's going on here?" he said, parking the chair beside the door.

"Housecleaning," I said.

"I guess the place can use it," he nodded, glancing around. "You'd be Brian, right? Colin Mitchell's son?"

"That's right," I said, offering my hand. He ignored it.

"Didn't see you at the funeral," he said.

"I've been working as a diver on the Texas Gulf, underwater welding, whatever. Mail to the rigs gets delayed sometimes."

"I see. Anybody fill you in on what happened?"

"Not really," I said. "My father's attorney, Mr. Klein, said he was killed in an auto accident."

"Not in the wreck, exactly," Bauer said. "He got drunk, ran his pickup off the road, and froze to death in the ditch."

"You should have been a doctor," I said. "You've got a terrific bedside manner."

He shrugged. "You don't look all that broken up. And as I recall you two didn't exactly part friends."

"That was a long time ago," I said.

"Was it? Doesn't seem like it. That's one of the problems with gettin' old. Nothing that happened in your lifetime seems very long ago. Love can last a lifetime. Grudges can too."

"If it'll ease your mind, Charlie, there was nothing like that between my father and me. Hell, after all this time I'm not sure there was *anything* between us, love, hate, or otherwise."

"There was blood," Bauer said. "There was at least that, since he left you everything he had."

"I didn't ask him to."

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"Most things you inherit come without asking. Like your looks. And you're of a size, you and Colin. Maybe you inherited his temper too," he said, nodding toward the broken window. "He could be mean, your old man. Hope he took that with him. You gonna be in town long?"

"I honestly don't know," I said.

"Well, if you plan to, I don't want to pick up any more furniture outa your parking lot. We understand each other?"

"Absolutely," I said.

"Good. I knew Colin a lotta years. Always expected he'd cash in early, get himself shot by a jealous husband or one of his lady friends, or maybe just dive Lake Huron a time too many. It bothers me some, him goin' like he did. He drank sometimes, who doesn't? But I never saw him so drunk he couldn't crawl out of a ditch."

"Is there any question that it was an accident?"

"I didn't say that. I just said it bothers me. Maybe because there was no class to it. Colin was no saint, but the man had style. He deserved to go out better. His truck's in the county impound lot with minor damage. You owe 'em a sixty buck towing fee. And for what it's worth, I'm sorry about your father."

"You needn't be on my account. Like you said, we didn't exactly part friends."

After Bauer left, Red and I worked like dogs scrubbing down the tables and the walls. If she had questions, she kept them to herself, which suited me just fine. The carpet was stained beyond redemption. It would have to be replaced. But underneath the grime of years, the knotty-pine walls glowed with a honey-golden patina that you couldn't buy new at any price. Which was fortunate. I had my severance pay from the oil rig, so I wasn't broke, but I wasn't exactly Diamond Jim Brady either.

Around nine we ran out of Spic and Span and I ran out of gas, a combination of jet lag and the backbreaking labor generally referred to as woman's work. We agreed to hit it hard again at ten the next morning. I climbed into my rented Ford Escort and drove—

Not home. To my father's house. It had never been a home to me. I lived with my mother in Detroit after the divorce, seeing my father only during the summers, when I worked for him rustling gear in the diving equipment shop behind the Crow's Nest and swamping out the bar. Even then I seldom stayed at the house. I usually slept

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on a cot in the back of the shop. His idea, and not a bad one, as it turned out.

The house was a rough-sided beachfront cottage on the tip of Ponemah Point, a fingerling peninsula that juts into the vast expanse of Lake Huron from the southern shore of Big Huron Bay.

I'd forgotten how isolated the place was, ten miles from town, the last four on a twin-rut road little better than a path, its nearest neighbor more than a mile away. The place looked eyeless and abandoned, lonely as an Aleutian lighthouse. I parked in the yard, grabbed my duffel bag out of the trunk, and was hounded to the house by the wind whining out of the dark pines that ringed the yard like sentries.

I let myself in, and promptly fell over a chain saw in the darkened entryway. The house was as cold as a witch's kiss and no more friendly. I dumped my bag in the living room, lit the LP gas stove and cranked it to the max, then trotted back outside to the generator shed. The generator's fuel tank was full and after a couple of yanks on the starter cord it settled down to a near silent hum. A string of yard lamps glowed to life, lighting my way back to the house.

The milk in the refrigerator was frozen solid, but otherwise the place seemed livable. I heated a tin of beef stew on the stove, made myself a cup of coffee, and took stock.

The cottage had two bedrooms, a kitchen, living room, and bath, all as clean and spartan as a YMCA. No art on the walls, only a few pieces of "ship's jewelry," trophies scavenged from wrecks at the bottom of Lake Huron. The Great Lakes are littered with shipwrecks, six thousand or so, from the first ship that ever sailed them, the *Griffin,* to the *Edmund Fitzgerald.* The trade in plundered artifacts is illegal of course, but that was apparently a minor point with my father. There was a wonderful walnut helm wheel over the small brick fireplace, a couple of brass running lamps, and a mint-condition brass ship's compass in one corner. With a rifle leaning against it.

I recognized the gun. It was my grandfather's old '94 Winchester, a standard deer rifle in northern Michigan. I picked it up and looked it over, remembering dusty summer afternoons, my father running me through drill with this rifle: shoulder, focus, squeeze. Never waste a shot, treat every gun as if it's loaded. This gun felt like it actually was.

I racked the action, and ejected a live round, then six more, which surprised me considerably. Guns in the house are normal up here,

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but not loaded. Never loaded. I put the rifle back in the rack where it belonged, picked up the cartridges, and replaced them in the box of shells that was sitting atop the compass.

Except for the Winchester, the gun rack was empty. There should have been two more guns. I found the first, my father's army .45 automatic, in a holster hanging behind the front door. It was also loaded, a full clip and a round in the chamber. His shotgun seemed to be missing, assuming he still had it after all these years. But I found something else almost as odd as the loaded weapons.

Negligees. Two of them. And a woman's embroidered silk robe in the bedroom closet. Don't get me wrong, my father liked women, in fact variety was the spice of his life. The Nest was his hunting ground and he did very well, but he almost never brought them out here. Said he liked waking up in his own place—alone. The *alone* was something he stressed a lot, the summers I worked for him.

But apparently he'd changed. Well, why not? It had been almost twenty years since I'd seen him. And now I never would again. I thought I might feel something, coming back here after all this time, a connection, a shiver of mortality, something. But I didn't. Last living relative or not, I had damn few memories of Colin Mitchell, most of them bad. And I'd covered a lot of ground since.

The bedrooms would be chilly until morning, so I unrolled my sleeping bag on the sofa near the little stove. But sleep wouldn't come. Too many images: the lawyer's office, the hassle in the Crow's Nest, Sheriff Bauer—and the guns. Loaded. Out here in the middle of nowhere. Maybe it was the creaking of the cottage in the nightwind, or maybe paranoia's hereditary, but I got up, took the .45 down off the rack, and parked it on the floor beside the sofa, near at hand. And promptly fell into the sleep of the just, deep and dreamless.

Until someone turned on the lights. Or at least that was my first impression. I blinked into dazed awareness, trying to focus, to figure out where I was, what was happening. The ship's clock on the bookcase showed a little after two A.M. And yet the room was suffused with a silvery glow, bright shafts of light bleeding around the edges of the drapes. Someone was spotlighting the house from the beach. Sharply awake now, I rolled off the sofa, jerked the .45 out of its holster. Then flattened myself against the wall beside the living room window, and swept the drapes open.

Ice. My God. Huron Bay was a crystalline, glimmering icefield that stretched unbroken to the horizon, and probably five hundred

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miles north to the Canadian shore. There was no spotlight out there, only the moon, three-quarters full, beaming through scudding snow clouds, refracted by a billion prisms, setting Lady Huron aglisten in a cloak of shattered diamonds.

I stared out into the glittering dark for an hour or more. Twenty years of diving in tropic seas—Viet Nam, the Caribbean, the Texas Gulf; I'd almost forgotten how the dead of winter transmuted the Great Lakes into thousands of square miles of jumbled floes and fields, as lifeless and magnificent as the valleys of the moon.

Eventually I started to wobble as exhaustion overtook me. But still I didn't go back to bed. I snuggled down in an easy chair instead, facing the bay ice with my sleeping bag wrapped around me, unwilling to give up the beauty of the night, even to sleep. I dozed, and woke, and marveled, and dozed again. And once I saw something moving out there, something large and dark and serpentine, miles offshore. And I knew I must be dreaming, nothing could live out there, and yet I saw it, and could even mark its progress past a twisted ice pillar that thrust skyward like crossed fingers. A while later the moon went down, yet the Lady continued to luminesce with a spectral phosphorescence of her own, candleglow from emerald chandeliers in the halls of her icewater mansions.

Dawn never came. I woke a bit after seven to a heavily overcast sky and a storm drifting down from Canada, snow devils swirling ahead of it like dervish scouts.

I couldn't have cared less. The cottage was snug, I didn't have to be anywhere for a few hours. I brewed up an exquisite pot of coffee, toasted a couple of cinnamon Pop Tarts, carried the lot into the living room, and ate breakfast with a view of the bay while the local AM radio station murmured Huron Harbor news in the background—farm reports, births, the Chamber of Commerce meeting. And it occurred to me that I felt like I'd come home. Too late, perhaps. But home nonetheless. For the first time in—Hell, maybe for the first time ever.

I was trying to define the feeling when I heard the faint whine of an approaching car lurching along the track. I peered through the frosty glass of the front door. A white Jag had pulled up beside my rented Escort, and a small, dark-haired woman in a chic white trenchcoat and snow boots climbed out and trotted briskly up the steps carrying a briefcase. I opened before she knocked.

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"Good morning," she said coolly, "I'm Karen Stepaniak, Century Realty? I'm sorry to bother you so early, Mr. Mitchell. Your attorney, Mr. Klein, told me you were staying out here. May I come in?"

"Of course," I said. "What's this about?"

"Business," she said, glancing around like a prospective tenant. She was fortyish but wearing it well, a heart-shaped face, large, intelligent eyes. Troubled eyes. "I realize you've only just arrived and the timing is terrible, but we have an offer that I thought you should know about."

"I see. Please, sit down. Could I get you some coffee?"

"No, thank you, I really can't stay. The offer is for a hundred and sixty thousand for both properties—thirty five down, the balance on land contract at eleven percent."

"I see," I said. "Look, I don't mean to put you on the spot, but I don't know much about local real estate values. Is this a good offer?"

"It's—fair," she said reluctantly.

"That wasn't the question," I said.

"No," she said, releasing a ragged breath. "It's not a particularly good offer. The Crow's Nest alone should be worth that. Still, it's on the table and I thought you should know."

"I appreciate your honesty," I said. "Tell me, is there any pressure involved in the offer?"

"I don't understand."

"To be blunt, how eager are the buyers?"

"Not very. They're an older couple from Detroit, looking for a business to retire to. They've made offers on several listings, all in this price range. I doubt they can go higher."

"That isn't why I asked. The truth is, I'm really not interested in selling just now and I couldn't if I wanted to. A lot of my father's papers seem to be missing."

"I see," she nodded briskly. "Well, if you change your mind, we're in the book. Thank you for your time." She turned to go, a bit hesitantly I thought.

"Miss Stepaniak? Forgive me if I'm out of line, but a lady seems to have left some clothing here. Could you do me a favor and take it with you? To drop off at Goodwill or whatever?"

"It's Mrs. Stepaniak actually," she said, reading my eyes. "I suppose I could. As a favor, of course." She took a deep breath and walked into the bedroom. I wandered out to the living room and straightened up, tossing my sleeping bag behind the couch and carrying the dishes to the sink. I glanced into the bedroom as I

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passed. Karen Stepaniak was sitting on the bed with her eyes closed, holding one of my father's crumpled shirts pressed over her mouth, breathing a memory. I rummaged through the chipped china mugs in the cupboard, came up with a fit-for-company Rookwood cup and saucer my father'd probably scavenged from a wreck, and poured her a cup of coffee.

She looked shaken when she came out—misty, her mouth a taut line. "Please, stay a moment," I said. "I'd like to talk to you."

She slumped down at the kitchen table, a decade older than when she arrived. She sipped her coffee gratefully and visibly knitted herself together. "So," she said after a bit, "I gather you know that your father and I were—involved."

"No, ma'am. But it does seem a bit early to talk real estate."

"The offer is legitimate," she said, stiffening a little. "Are you going to run the Crow's Nest for a while?"

"Yeah, I think I will," I said.

"Forgive me for being nosy, but Cole told me you were working as a diver in Texas or somewhere."

"I'm surprised he mentioned me at all."

"Actually he talked about you quite a bit, especially lately. Did he get in touch with you?"

"I haven't heard from him in years. Just a note when my grandfather died, and that was six months late. Why was he going to contact me?"

"I'm not really sure," she said. "He said it was family business, but he seemed uncertain about it. I take it there was some kind of trouble between you."

"Nothing complicated. The summer after I graduated from high school, I stayed out here. We weren't strangers. He taught me to dive and I'd been working for him every summer for years. But living under the same roof was a bad idea. He was drinking a lot then, and one night he brought a woman home from the bar, and they were both drunk and there was a scuffle. And, ah, I tried to rescue the damsel in distress. And got my lights punched out for my trouble. I enlisted in the navy the next day, and I've never been back."

She nodded. "I see, and that's all there was to it? A fight?"

"That and the fact that he didn't bother to contact me when my grandfather was dying. We'd had problems, but I deserved better than that."

"I suppose so. So why come back now? For the inheritance?"

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"Not really." I shrugged. "I guess I was just ready for a change in my life. Midlife crisis perhaps. I've been hitting the booze a little harder than I should lately, even wound up in jail a few months ago because of it. A great place to sort out your options, jail. And it occurred to me that I'd resented my father all these years, but I'm probably more like him than I care to admit."

"You are a bit like him, you know. For instance, it seems very natural to sit here and talk with you. But you're quite different too. You're civilizing the place already for one thing," she said, indicating her cup. "You probably even sleep in beds."

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's nothing, really. I used to stop by and fix breakfast sometimes. Our schedules didn't really mesh except for mornings. Often as not I'd find him asleep in his chair in the living room. He used to sit out there all night, watching the lake, or the ice. And dream. He said sometimes he could hear her singing."

"Hear who?"

"The lady of the lake. God, what a line of blarney he had. And I'm going to miss him more than I can say. Thank you for the tea and sympathy," she said, rising briskly. "If you're going to run the Nest, take some friendly advice. Show some profit on the books. Colin always ran it in the red to avoid taxes, which made it a tough sell. I can probably get you half again as much as he was asking."

"Wait a minute. Are you saying that he was trying to sell the Nest?"

"Of course. I thought you understood that."

"No, I didn't. I guess I assumed you'd—"

"—tried to market it without a listing? Hardly. I don't need business that badly."

"Sorry. When did he list the Nest?"

"He listed both properties about six weeks ago, I believe. We—he planned to leave after the holidays for Baja, said he'd had enough snow for a lifetime, that he was getting too old for cold water." She swallowed hard and looked away.

"I'm still not sure I understand. Did you have an offer for the Nest before the accident?"

"No. I only received this offer a few days ago."

"So he was planning to leave whether the Nest sold or not? With what?"

"I'm sorry, you've lost me."

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"What did he plan to live on? According to his attorney he only had a few hundred in the bank."

"I'm afraid I don't know. We never really discussed his finances. From what planning we did, I gathered that money wouldn't be a problem, especially since he could have gotten considerably more for the Nest if he'd waited for the tourist season to sell out."

"I see. Forgive me for being blunt, but I don't suppose you were planning to support him down there?"

"Mr. Mitchell," she said, straightening to her full five-three, "I realize you probably think badly of me, so let me clear the air. You mentioned a midlife crisis a minute ago. Perhaps your father was mine. I was a reasonably happily married woman before I became—involved with him. He asked me to go to Mexico with him, and I agreed. But I'm not sure I would have gone. And while I'm being frank, I hope I can count on your discretion."

"Of course," I said, "and I apologize for—well, for everything. Just one last thing, did my father seem at all uneasy the past month or so?"

"Uneasy? How do you mean?"

"I found two of his guns parked in strategic spots when I arrived last night, his pistol behind the door, a rifle in the living room. Both loaded."

"I don't recall seeing them," she said, "and I was here quite often. But uneasy? You really didn't know him well, did you?"

"No," I said, "I suppose not."

"I'm afraid that was your loss. He was a complex man, not always easy to understand, but always interesting. And he was probably the least fearful man I've ever known. I don't think he was afraid of anything on God's green earth."

"Considering how things turned out," I said, "maybe he should have been."

Lesson one for a small businessman. If you're late, everybody else will be on time, and you're paying them by the hour. Red and two workmen from the glass company were waiting none too patiently for me in the parking lot when I arrived. The glaziers promptly hung a sheet of canvas over the wall to keep the weather out, then disappeared under it to widen the opening for the new window. Red began scrubbing the walls where we'd quit the night before, and I decided to sort out the paperwork in the office. And then the wolf came to the door. Literally.

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Someone began pounding on the back door, I opened it, and a wolf was sitting there, eyeing me like a potential lunch. Not a Malamute or an Alsatian. An honest-to-God Canadian grey wolf. She must've weighed close to a hundred and sixty pounds—coarse charcoal pelt, amber, intelligent eyes.

"Hey, Mitch, how you been doin'? You remember me?"

I managed to shift my gaze away from the wolf long enough to glance at her owner. A big guy in an old red-plaid hunting coat and a corduroy cap with one torn earflap. An ugly brown birthmark leaked down from his cap over one cheek—a moon-shaped face like a pimento loaf, unknown bits of stuff sticking in it.

Ratshit.

I almost said it. It was the only name I could come up with, one kids hung on him in grade school and taunted him with until his teens when he suddenly bulked up to near grizzly bear size. And temper. Radowicz. That was it. Judgment Christ Radowicz.

"Jud," I said, "how are you?"

"Good, I'm good. I heard you was back in town. I stopped by your dad's place this morning but you was already gone."

"You still live out there on the Point?"

"Yeah. In my mom's ol' shack. She died you know."

"No, I hadn't heard. I'm sorry."

"Shit happens." He shrugged, looking away. "Look, I was wonderin' if you got any work for me. My truck's broke down and I need some cash money. Any kinda manual labor, you know."

"I, ahm. . . . Do you know anything about diving gear, Jud?"

"Sure. I gofered for your dad plenty a times. I can't work more'n thirty feet down though. I got the bad ears."

"I don't want you to dive, Jud. I need somebody to clean up the dive shop out in back, straighten up the equipment, wash the walls and the shelves. It's a lot of bullwork. Six bucks an hour sound fair?"

"Damn straight." He nodded eagerly. "That'd be great. You want me to start right now?"

"Anytime you like, but you'll have to do something about the wolf."

"You mean Dog?"

"That's a dog?"

"Nah, Dog's her name. She's a cross-wolf. But you go around yellin' Wolf, people think you're nuts. You don't want her around?"

"We've got a food license, Jud. We can't have animals on the premises."

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"I don't know." He frowned. "I guess I could drop her off to home. Take me a couple hours."

"Why should . . . ? You mean you walked here? From the Point?"

"Sure," he said, puzzled, "I told you my truck's broke down."

"So you did. All right, tell you what, you keep Dog in the dive shop for today, but don't bring her tomorrow. Okay?"

"Whatever you say, Mitch," he said, pumping my hand in his grimy fist. "You won't be sorry." The cross-wolf's eyes never wavered from my belly. She didn't offer to shake hands. Neither did I.

I was headed back to the office when the canvas tarp draped over the window billowed aside and a ghost stepped from beneath it—a short, compactly built man in a navy pea coat, with dark, wind-tousled hair and pirate's eyes. "I been thrown out a few saloon windows," he said, glancing around. "Don't think I've ever come in through one before. It's a lot less painful. How you been, Mitch?"

"Terry Fortier," I said, grinning, feeling my spirits lift. "I figured you'd be dead or in jail by now."

"Nah, I'm too pretty for that. But before you start blubbering how glad you are to see me, I'd better warn you. I have to beat the livin' bejesus outa you and break one of your arms."

"Why? Just because I didn't write?"

"Nope, because Joe Carney slipped me fifty bucks to bust you up."

"Only fifty? I'm insulted. Think you're up to it?"

"Oh, no doubt about it. Still, seems kinda shortsighted to whup up on a guy who just inherited a saloon. Tell you what, buy me a drink, we'll call it even."

"Buy your own drink. You're the one with the extra fifty."

"By God, you're as cheap as your old man ever was. Okay, I'll buy, you pour. In your office?"

"Sounds fair," I said. "What about Carney?"

"I guess he'll have to hire somebody to stomp the both of us now," he said, following me through to the office. "Fifty more for you, at least a grand for me. He hasn't got that kinda money. And speakin' of hirin', was that Ratshit I saw headin' back to the dive shop?"

"Do people still call him that?"

"Hell no," Terry grinned, "at least not to his face. Baggers Gant made a wisecrack about that mud pie birthmark of his and Rats beat him half to death for it. He's Mister Radowicz far as I'm concerned, but I wouldn't want him working for me. He's always been two bricks shy of a load, but since his mom died he's probably certi-

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fiable. Lives in that old shack past your father's place with a damn wolf."

"Dog," I corrected, pouring two fair-sized jolts of Courvoisier into a pair of brandy sniftèrs.

"If that thing's a dog, Cujo was a hamster. You want to hire him, it's your lookout, but watch him. His only talent's for makin' people nervous, and rightly so."

"He said he'd been working for my father."

"Yeah, he rousted for him on his boat, did scutwork around the cottage. Colin could always handle him, kid him out of his moods and such. But no offense, Mitch, you aren't your father."

"No, I'm not," I said, raising my glass, "but I think I can probably manage Jud. Happy days."

"And happier nights," Terry said, knocking back half of his brandy with a single belt. "You know about your father's boat, right?"

"What about it?"

"I bought it off him a few weeks back. Wasn't the bill of sale in the estate papers or whatever?"

"No. Actually, quite a few papers seem to be missing, the title to the house, a few other things. They're probably filed around here somewhere."

"Well, I got a copy of the bill if you want to see it. You won't like it though. He had a four-year-old, twenty-seven-foot Bayliner. He, ah, he sold it to me for a grand."

"A grand?" I echoed, sipping my brandy, reading Terry's face. It was a good face, matinee-idol handsome. I'd known him since I was ten. Best friends back then. A long time ago. Maybe too long.

"So," I said, "why don't you tell me about it?"

"About what?"

"What my father was into. C'mon Terry, something was up. He was dumping his house and the business. He practically gave you his boat. He was getting out in a hurry. Why? What was he afraid of?"

"Your father? Hell, I don't think he was afraid of anybody. Most people were afraid of him. He had a helluva temper, your old man. He kinda mellowed some lately, though. Maybe because of his latest ladyfriend. He was always a fox in the henhouse with women, but his new lady was special. Wanted to marry her, I hear."

"Karen Stepaniak?"

"My, my, what big ears we have."

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"She stopped by the house this morning. On business."

"Well I hope you got it all finished up. The lady's got a mean sumbitch husband the size of New Jersey. Hacksaw, they call him. He and your father tangled a couple months back."

"What happened?"

"Hack came to the Nest, started around the bar after Colin. Colin came up with a .45, shoved it under Hack's chin, eared back the hammer, said one more step, they'd hafta scrape his brains off the ceiling with a trowel. Man, you shoulda seen his eyes. I really thought he was gonna do it. Hack did too. He backed off. But not by much. Told your old man he'd break his back if he didn't stay away from Karen."

"And now he's dead," I said.

"But not from a broken back." Terry shrugged. "He froze to death."

"The .45 was hanging behind the door at the cottage," I said, "and my father's Winchester was in the living room. Both loaded."

"I guess maybe he took Hack seriously."

"Maybe. But I think there's more to it than a jealous husband. And more to the boat business too."

"Really? Like what?"

"Money, Terry. It comes down to the money. I can see why he'd take a low-ball price for the Nest and the cottage if he was in a hurry to get out. But not the boat. He could've sold it for double what you paid him any day of the week. So maybe you'd better tell me what else was involved. Unless you'd like to try earning Carney's fifty."

For a moment I thought he might. The competitive curiosity that always exists between friends reared its head. Who's really quicker? Who'll quit first? The dark side of affection.

"You know," Terry said slowly, "we might just get to that sometime, you and me. But not over a lousy fifty bucks. Or even a boat. I gave Colin a name."

"What kind of a name?"

"A salvage buyer's name. There's a heavy market for contraband from the deep water wrecks. Scavenging's illegal, but sometimes the money's just too good to pass up."

"And you're involved in this trade?"

"Let's just say I know people who are."

"And my father? Was he involved?"

"Not really. Oh, I'm not sayin' he wouldn't buy a brass running lamp or a ship's wheel off a diver who needed money, but he mostly

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turned the stuff over to the Deveraux Museum here in town. He never actually dealt in plunder as far as I know."

"Until last month."

"Could be. I just gave him the name."

"What was he trying to sell?"

"I don't know. A deal like that, I didn't ask any questions. Especially not of Colin. I've seen him in action."

"So have I," I said. "What was the dealer's name?"

"Why do you want to know?"

"It could be the gentleman owes me some money. Or a lot more."

"What, you think the buyer maybe ripped your father off? Or did him in somehow?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"I suppose it's possible. The buyer's definitely a hard-nose. Runs a couple pawnshops down in Saginaw. Supposed to be mob connected. But I don't think he and your father tangled. The buyer called me last week to ask if Colin had made a deal with somebody else. He didn't know he was dead."

"And you just took his word for that?"

"I had no reason to doubt it," Terry said evenly, "and I still don't. The guy's always been straight with me. Anyway, I doubt he'd talk to you. Too risky."

"He can either talk to me or to Sheriff Bauer. Your choice."

Terry eyed me for a moment, then shrugged. "So much for auld lang syne," he said. "Tell you what, I'll make a couple calls, see what I can find out. If anything smells wrong, we'll both take the whole thing straight to Bauer. Of course you realize that if something heavy did go down, the buyer's liable to be edgy as a pit bull on amphetamines. We could end up in the same shape as your old man."

"Then just give me his name."

"No, I hooked Colin up with him. If it went bad I'm at least partly responsible. I'll handle it. Unless you think maybe *I'm* involved in whatever happened?"

"No, of course not. How much time will you need?"

"A day or two."

"I'll give you three," I said.

"Assuming we're both still alive in three days," he sighed. I thought he was worried about trouble from the buyer. It didn't occur to me that my father might reach back to take me with him . . .

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The workmen finished installing the bay window late that afternoon. And a very odd thing happened. When they swept the canvas away to reveal a Rockwell-esque view of the snowbound harbor, it was as though a new door opened in my life. And for the first time I could sense a pattern, a possible future that didn't include welding on an endless parade of drilling platforms in Texas or Alaska or God knows where. Or raw towns and strange faces and death in deep water.

"So," Red said, "what do you think?"

"I like it," I said. "I like it so much I want another one, a small one. In my office."

The workman frowned. "I doubt I've got a unit that size in stock. Might take a few days to get one."

"No rush," I said. "I'll be here."

Even the cottage looked different to me when I drove up that evening. I'd always thought of it as lonely and isolated. Now it just seemed private.

I made myself a cup of coffee, and gazed out the beachfront window, marveling at the twilight shadows on the ice and the shore, and—I noticed something odd.

The boathouse on the beach seemed to be padlocked. But according to Terry, there was no boat in there. So why lock an empty shed? Unless it was being used to store something else?

I put on a pair of my father's heavy work boots, grabbed my jacket and a flashlight, and trotted out to the boathouse, a garage-sized red metal outbuilding built over a narrow, frozen channel that led out into Huron Bay. The padlock on the side door was a combination Masterlock, brand new, impossible to cut. It took me twenty minutes to pry the hasp off with a tire iron. A waste of time. As soon as I pulled the door open I could see the shed was empty. No boat, no plunder, just the grey ice of the frozen channel and a cluttered workbench along the far wall.

As I started in I felt something brush across my shins. I hesitated. And saved my legs. I played the light down at my feet, and still nearly missed it. A tripwire, a clear monofilament fishing line, almost invisible in the dusk. I traced it with the light beam along the wall, then across the room to the workbench. To my father's shotgun, locked in the bench vise, its barrel aimed directly at the door. Sweet Jesus.

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I was instantly bathed in a cold sweat, chill as an icewater shower. The line was taut across my shin. How much slack was left? I couldn't tell. Keeping the light beam on the line, I slid my left hand down my pantleg to keep the tripwire from snapping back when I stepped away. I took a shallow, ragged breath, then very slowly started shifting my feet backward a millimeter at a time, until my legs were clear of the line. Then I eased my finger back until the line returned to its original position across the open doorway.

I sidestepped out of the line of fire, sagged against the wall, and the damn gun went off, hammering a round of buckshot through the doorway beside me.

That bastard! The shot had erased the line and I stormed into the empty shed, unlocked the vise, jerked the shotgun free, and smashed it over the bench, shattering the stock. Christ, he could have killed me! What kind of a psycho would boobytrap an empty shed? He—

He wouldn't have. As my panicky heart-rate slowly subsided, that realization gradually sank in. He had a murderous temper, my father, one I'd inherited. But he wasn't crazy. At least not altogether. So what was he guarding in here? I tossed the broken shotgun aside on the bench and played the flashlight around the room. The boat entrance door was barred from the inside, so whatever it was should still be in here. But there was nothing! An empty room, nothing on the walls, only a few odd tools on the bench, the floor a frozen sheet of . . .

Ice. There were tracks on the ice, gouges. Marks of a snowmobile tread. A snowmobile had been driven in here through the channel door. And something heavy had been unloaded onto the ice, heavy enough to mark it with deep grooves in a six foot square.

Frowning, I eyed the square. It was too large. What could you carry on a snowmobile that would take up this much space? And weigh enough to make gouges like these? I knelt and ran my fingers over the grooves. They were jagged, of uneven depth. They hadn't been pressed into the ice. They'd been cut. And I only knew one way to cut through ice this thick.

I jogged back to the house and got the chain saw I'd fallen over in the entryway that first night. The chain teeth were dull, not nearly sharp enough to cut wood. But sharp enough for ice. Back in the shed it fired up with a roar. I revved the engine, getting it warm, then lowered the blade to the ice. It bit in fiercely, spraying the room with chips and splinters. The racket in the metal shed was deafening. I needed goggles and muffs and heavier gloves, but I

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didn't care. I was too close now, and much too pumped up.

The blade chewed through to the water beneath, and I followed the line of the square around until the slab broke free, rocking beneath my weight. I shut off the saw and set it on the bench, my head clanging like a fire alarm in the sudden silence. I stepped on one edge of the slab, tilting the opposite side up, and simply thrust it up over the rim like a sliding door.

The water was roiled from the movement of the slab and it took a few moments before I could see anything clearly. But they were down there. Wooden crates, six of them, streaked with lake-bottom mud, with wisps of sodden excelsior sticking through the slats. The top of the uppermost box had been pried off so I shucked my jacket, rolled up my sleeve, and reached down into the icy water. And retrieved a cup.

A single china cup. With a familiar pattern. Rookwood. A mate to the one in the house. I set it carefully aside, dried my arm as best I could, and slipped my jacket on. Six cases of antique china in mint condition. I wasn't sure how old the stuff was, turn-of-the-century or earlier from the look of the boxes. I'm no expert on china, but I know enough about salvage to know the crates were probably worth five or six thousand each, maybe more. But not enough.

Even at ten grand per case, this cache would barely make up the loss my father was going to take for a quick sale of the Crow's Nest. Plus, he'd kept the boxes underwater to keep the excelsior from freezing and pulverizing the china, but if these six cases were the lot, he wouldn't have bothered to store it here. He would have carried it into the cottage.

So there had to be more of it. Perhaps a whole shipload more. And maybe I even knew where it was. Or where it had been, anyway.

I'm not sure I would have called Sheriff Bauer even if there'd been a phone. In any case, I didn't try. I went back to the house and took a bearing on the crossed-finger ice spire where I'd seen movement the first night. It appeared to be about two miles out on the bay, a serious hike over the ice, but not impossible, especially since I was fairly sure there'd be a path out there. I switched on the yard light to give myself a homing beacon, then I shoved a full clip into the butt of my father's .45 automatic, slid it into my parka pocket, and set off.

Following the snowmobile tracks down the boat channel to the lake was the easy part. Once I was clear of the shore, the wind and

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the swirling snowdevils made walking difficult, and following the narrow tracks even harder. The ice stretched ahead and around me like a moonscape of thrusting slabs, jagged craters, and occasional ebon pools of lustrous black glass, scoured and polished by the wind. From shore the ice appears white, but out on the cap it's dappled, the skin of an ancient lady, beige patches of windblown beach sand, greyish soot smudges, and indigo shadows that stretch like fingers from every ridge and turret.

And away from shore, the lady whispers. Beneath her alabaster shroud, she moves in her dreams. Her tides follow the moon, harrying the waters of a thousand rivers ever eastward to the St. Lawrence and the sea. The floating pack responds like a lover, with gentle shifts and moans and murmurs. And occasionally a sharp crack that instantly reminds you of the depth and darkness below. And of the spirits who sleep there. For everyone who grows up in the north country knows someone who has died on the ice. Fishing, or snowmobiling. Or just walking across it.

The firmness of the pack is an illusion. It's riddled with holes, airpockets hidden by snow, gaps in the plate-seams camouflaged by a thin ice skin. I knew this of course, but I also knew that as long as I kept to the snowmobile track, I should be safe enough. Anywhere the machine had been, I could follow.

I lost the trail a number of times along the way beneath drifted snow, or where a plate had shifted and jumbled the track. But each time I was able to find it again simply by choosing the smoothest direct route. A snowmobile can sprint through broken country like a mustang, but the one I was following needed a level road for its fragile cargo.

I was nearly a mile from shore when the moon broke through, bringing the ice to life with the ghostly dancing of cloud shadows. The poignant, untouchable beauty of the night was hypnotic, and not for the first time I felt the lure of the lady below. Come down, come down to me . . . Leave your world. Sleep with me . . .

And I almost did.

I found the crossed-finger ice marker two miles out, but the track continued beyond it, northward, how far I couldn't be sure. And at that point I was so entranced by the silvery spell of the ice that I would have followed the path five hundred miles, to Canada, or oblivion. So I trudged on, nudged by the nightwind, hearing the crunch of snow beneath my boots, the murmur of the pack like low voices from another room. And then I stopped. So suddenly I sur-

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prised myself. There was a faint pattern in the ice ahead. A crude square. It could have been natural, but somehow I knew it wasn't. The snowmobile track veered sharply to the right, and ended a few feet away.

I cautiously stepped to the edge of the square and stamped my foot over the line. And punched through the crust so easily I nearly stumbled in. This was the place then.

I switched on my flashlight and played it around, not looking for anything in particular, more to be seen than to see. I found a few tracks, mud splotches on the ice where the crates had been lifted free. And I gradually felt that psychic touch, the uneasy sense that I was being watched. But I knew it wasn't true. The icepack was swimming in moonlight. I literally could see for miles in every direction, and there was nothing *to* see but ice, and snow, and shadows.

And yet, I had that feeling, as sharp and cold as an ice pack between my shoulderblades.

I played the flashlight around in ever widening circles. And suddenly caught twin reflections, eyes staring at me unblinking from fifty yards beyond the square out on the pack. A shape rose up out of the snow and began moving toward me, circling. I felt a soul-deep shiver of dread older than my life, older than words. A grey shadow, drifting across the snow silent as smoke. A wolf. No. Not a wolf.

Dog.

She made no sound—no growling, not so much as a whisper of her pads gliding over the ice, and at times she'd seem to disappear, blending into the moonshadows so perfectly I couldn't define her form until she moved again. And each time she was closer. Much closer. I grasped the butt of the .45 in my coat pocket, cold comfort indeed. In the moonlight I'd have no chance of hitting her until she was close enough to charge, and that might be too late.

I heard a faint whine from behind me, and risked a quick glance away from Dog toward the shore. Another shape was moving out there, coming toward me. But not a silent one. A snowmobile, low and black, running without lights, towing a sledge behind it, snaking through the broken surface of the pack like a slalom racer. Dog heard it too, and slowed her advance, crouching in the lee of a snow-hummock, a formless threat, invisible except for the metallic glint of her eyes.

The snowmobile whined to a halt a few yards away. Judgment Christ Radowicz unfolded himself from the machine, a hulking scarecrow figure, the night wind snapping his tattered coat. And I

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was glad it was him. I'd been half expecting Terry. He unstrapped a tool from the sled. A double-bitted brush axe. He didn't threaten me with it. Just held it. "Turn out the light," he said. "Somebody might see it."

"Maybe they have already," I said.

"Nah, it don't look that bright from shore. I wouldna seen it if I wasn't watchin'. I was gonna talk to you about this," he said, gesturing toward the ice patch behind me. "I was hopin' I could wait awhile, see what you was like, but it don't matter now. How did you find out? Colin leave a note or somethin'?"

"No. I saw you out here the night I arrived. I didn't know what it meant at the time."

"I been comin' out every night to bust up the ice," he said, hefting the axe. "Otherwise it'll freeze over, I'd have to use the saw again. Noise carries a long ways out here. You know what's down there?"

"A wreck," I said. "With a cargo of china."

He nodded. "Superstructure's all tore away. Only thing left is the keel. Colin tried to look her up. She might be the Victorine outa Chicago, 1891, but he couldn't be sure. I found her fishin' last fall, light was just right—seen her shape. She's fifty feet down, too deep for me—I got the bad ears—but Cole didn't have no trouble. Neither will you. We can go partners."

"Can we? Things didn't turn out very well for your last partner, Jud."

"No," he said, shaking his massive head slowly, "they didn't. It was awful, Mitch."

"What happened?"

"We had it all worked out. Colin had a guy ready to take the stuff. We figured we could make three, maybe four runs a night durin' the dark of the moon, stash the cases in his boathouse. He said there was thirty boxes down there."

"I only found six," I said.

"We only made two runs. Three cases are all the sledge'll carry and we had to get 'em ashore fast before they froze. First couple runs was no trouble, but about halfway back out after the second load, Colin fell off the sled. He was ridin' behind me, swiggin' down brandy to keep warm, and then he leaned against me for a while. I thought he was asleep. And then he just . . . fell off." He swallowed, looked away. His face was in shadow. I couldn't read it at all.

"I stopped the sled, but he was dead. Had been for a while. Already gettin' cold. I guess the water and the rides back and forth was just too much for him."

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"Maybe," I said. "What about the 'accident,' Jud? How did that happen?"

"I didn't know what to do. Colin always did the thinkin', but I figured if I called an ambulance or somethin', the law'd backtrack the sled like you done, find out what we was doin'. So I got his divin' gear off, drove his truck into the ditch a ways down the road, and—God it was terrible, Mitch. The worst thing I ever been through in my life."

"I expect it was," I said, risking a quick glance over at Dog. "Why didn't you go back for the stuff in the boathouse?"

"I didn't know the combination to the lock, and anyway he had it booby-trapped."

"Why was that, Jud? Didn't he trust you?"

"He never trusted nobody. It's just how he was."

"But I can trust you, right?"

"Sure you can. Look, I waited for you, didn't I? I mean, if I wanted to cut you out I coulda got somebody else."

"Maybe. Or maybe you just didn't know anybody you could trust. Or who'd trust you."

"No, that ain't right and you know it. I been waitin' for you. You always treated me decent, never called me names, and you had more reason than any of 'em. Look," he said, starting forward, "we can work things out ashore, but right now we better bust up the hole again and get outa here before somebody spots us."

"Don't come any closer," I said, pulling the .45.

"Dammit, Mitch, don't be stupid," he said, halting. "We can't stay out here."

"We'll go," I said, "but first, toss that axe away."

"I'd never hurt you, Mitch. You must know that."

"All I know is, my father's dead. Maybe it happened the way you said. But it's also possible you and Dog just kept him from climbing out of the water long enough for him to lose consciousness. And then let the wind do the rest."

"That's crazy. Why should I do that?"

"Maybe because you heard he was taking off with his girlfriend and thought he was going to cheat you. Or maybe you just got greedy. Figuring motives is Charlie Bauer's job, not mine. But one thing I am sure of. I've got a chance for a new life up here, and I'm not gonna start out by plundering a wreck, with you or anybody else."

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"No," he said, "that ain't fair. I've never had nothin'. This is the only chance I'll ever get. You can't just throw it away."

He shuffled toward me, a ragged neanderthal, axe in hand. "Jud, back off," I said, raising the .45. "I don't want to shoot anybody—"

From the corner of my eye I caught a flash of movement. Dog snaking rapidly my way, belly to the ground, fangs bared, snarling a deep rumble that seemed to emanate from the ice itself. "Call her off, Jud!" She rose suddenly and I fired a warning shot toward her, the gun blasting like a lightning strike in the darkness.

"NOO! Don't!" Jud howled, hurling himself at me. I slashed him across the temple with the gun barrel as he slammed into me chest-high, but the force of his rush hurled us backward onto the broken icefield. We came down hard together, hammering at each other, and then the ice collapsed, and we were plunged into the freezing dark.

The shock was incredible, the chill so fierce I almost cried out. Jud's weight was carrying me down. I twisted away from him, forgot about the damned gun, forgot everything but clawing my way back up to the grey jumble of ice above me, breaking through, gasping for air, then flinching backward as Dog lunged at me from the edge of the hole, her fangs clashing only inches from my face.

Jud thrashed to the surface a few feet behind me, flailing blindly about, blood streaming from the gash on his temple over the stain on his cheek, dazed, desperate. I tried to grope my way to the edge, the ice chunks breaking off in my hands, freezing to my arms like iron leeches. Dog was berserk, charging frantically back and forth, snarling, whining. Then suddenly she launched herself into the water with us, crashing into my shoulder, smashing me aside as she tried to get to Jud. God, it was horrible. She couldn't swim in the broken ice, and we were all plunging about, churning in the ice cauldron like souls in hell.

I thrust myself away from them, struggling through the broken ice chunks toward the far side. I managed to find a hold and clawed my way out, an inch at a time, my hands slipping, too numb to grip. For a moment I just knelt there, head down, panting like an animal, water streaming from my face, my clothes.

A howl from behind me brought me out of the haze. Dog was half out of the water, scrabbling at the rim with Jud clinging to her pelt, but neither of them could hold on, and they fell back. Jud lost his grip on her fur and went under, and Dog quit trying to save herself and tried to paddle to him, and something snapped in me and a *NO*

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came roaring up out of my subconscious. Not like this. Not like this!

I crawled on my hands and knees around the edge of the pool toward them. I groped in the water for Jud, managed to tangle my fist in his hair, and hauled his shoulders clear of the water. I didn't have strength enough to pull him out, but he weakly inched himself onto the pack, then collapsed, moaning like a child.

Dog was still struggling, going under, almost spent. I leaned out, fumbling for the scruff of her neck, but the moment I touched her she whirled and clamped onto my arm, her fangs tearing through my coat, the arm instantly afire with agony.

I roared and tried to pull free, and saved her miserable life as she came boiling up onto the ice. I hammered her face with my left hand, jabbing at her eyes, and she let go and spun away, snarling, crouching to spring again.

But she didn't. She stood her ground, glaring at me, eyes alight with fury, and if I'd had the damned gun I would have shot her on the spot. Jud tried to stand, but his legs folded and he fell, more dead than alive. And so was I. We had to get away from here. Now.

I managed to coax Jud to the sledge. He had to crawl on his own, because whenever I reached for him, Dog lunged at me, warning me off, and there was no doubt in my mind she'd tear me apart if I touched him. The snowmobile fired up with the first touch of the switch, thank God, because my strength was almost gone. I flicked on the headlight and gunned it forward, heading for the shore, with Jud unconscious on the sledge behind and Dog trotting alongside. And she had the better of it. At least she was moving. The nightwind howled down from the moon, sweeping across the ice, freezing my clothing to me, numbing my face, my senses . . .

And I blacked out.

Somewhere on the trip back, I lost consciousness completely. I don't remember smashing up the machine near shore, or crawling to my car, or driving it until I ran into a roadsign on US 23. They tell me I did. I honestly don't remember. I was unconscious until noon the next day, nearly fourteen hours later.

And only then did anyone go to look for Jud.

And he wasn't there. No sign of him, Charlie Bauer said, either where I'd wrecked the snowmobile or at the cottage. Bauer sent a Coast Guard chopper out that afternoon, and visibility on the lake was good. But still they didn't find him. He'd vanished as though he'd never existed. I doubt he'll be missed much. He was big and

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surly and half crazy, with the mark of Cain on him, and his only talent was for making people uneasy.

I visited his shack every day for a week, and he didn't come back there. Still, he could have survived. He'd lived out on that point all his life, and he was strong as a bull. Or a wolf.

And I wanted him to be alive. I needed him to be. He may have killed my father. I need to ask him about that, and look into his eyes when he answers. But most of all, I want to ask him about the checks. Canceled checks that I found in a box at the Crow's Nest with my father's missing papers. Checks paid monthly to Stella Radowicz, Jud's mother. By my father.

Eighteen year's worth.

I think I know what they were for. We were of a size, my father, and me, *and* Jud. But I'll never be sure until I look in his face, and for the first time, try to see past that damned birthmark. But I don't think I ever will.

I think he's gone. I think the lady took him, down and down, to sleep in the deep green halls of her icewater mansions.

In my heart, I know it's true. Because ten days after Jud disappeared, Dog came back. I saw her on the beach at dusk, gaunt as her own ghost, her grey pelt rimed with ice, her pads bloody and swollen. I called her but she wouldn't come to me. She roams the point now, guarding Jud's house, and mine. I put food out for her, and sometimes she eats it, but mostly she kills her own. She was a one-man Dog. She's all wolf now.

Sometimes I wake in the moonlight, and I see her sitting on the lakeshore, staring out over the ice, waiting for someone she's lost.

And so do I. And so do I.

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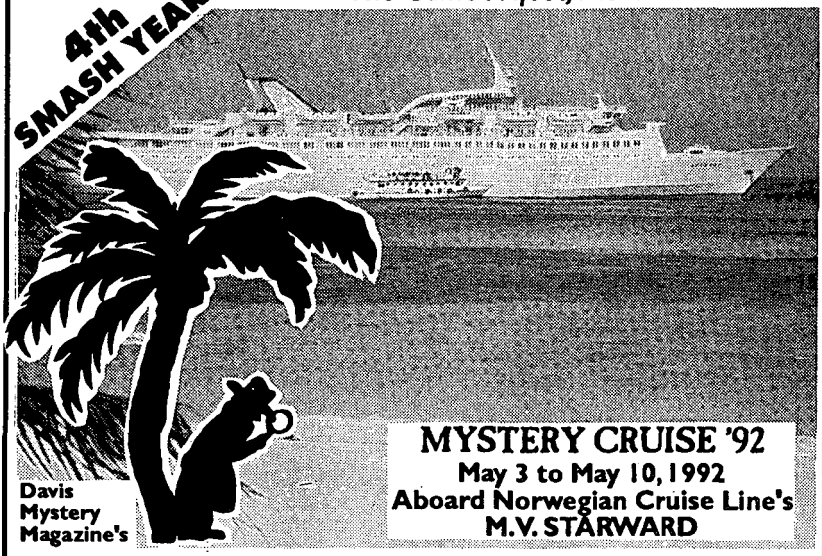
"The Game's Afoot, Mon!"



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a *NEW* police procedural by

JEFFRY SCOTT

"Frustrating," Inspector Howarth said.

"Bloody disgraceful. It's getting away from us, Dave."

"Not for want of trying, boss," Howarth said. "We've taken a million statements, done the house-to-house, given a spin to every nutcase and creep in the county."

Maston wasn't listening. For some reason, the niceness surrounding the undeniable nastiness of Kate Steers' violent death impressed him as nightmarish . . .

TOO GOOD TO LIVE

by JEFFRY SCOTT

Within an hour it got on Maston's nerves: the way everybody kept telling him that she had been such, well, such a *nice* girl.

After the third or fourth person, starting with the local Inspector, had said this, Maston amended tetchily, "A dead girl. A murdered girl. That's more to the point. I don't care if she was competition for Mother Teresa." He was rewarded with shocked glances—and policemen, even rural ones, are hard to shock. So he gathered that Kate Steers had meant something special to the small town of Browall.

Which was significant. For Browall, with its twenty-thousand population, wasn't all that small. Newcomers were in the majority, migrants from the Midlands who had followed the jobs when a Japanese company was eccentric enough to build its British car plant in the West of England. Yet even among so many strangers, Kate Steers had been a local celebrity of sorts.

"High-profile woman, then," Maston suggested. "She made sure her do-gooding got heard about."

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Detective-Sergeant Nellis, that third or fourth person to mention the niceness of Kate Steers, spoke stiffly. "No, sir, she wasn't like that. Not in the least."

Maston's eyes felt bedded in sand. "Let's start again, old son. Forget what she wasn't, fill me in on what she was."

"Sorry, sir, it's just that she was such—" Nellis colored sheepishly at repeating the scorned phrase and bit it short. "She was a bit shy and old-fashioned, but everyone knew of Kate because she did any amount of sponsored charity events—walks and half marathons and bike rides and that. Anyone who met her liked the girl. My wife was one of Kate's sponsors when she did the long swim last year out to Dun Cow Island. We had to pay a fiver, and never parted with money more gladly. *I* wouldn't do that swim, not even with a safety boat along, like she had. Only a little dot of a thing she was, too. Seeing her body down in the ditch by the bus stop there, it was like a child sleeping." He broke off to blow his nose, half turning away.

Maston experienced a complex emotion in the region of envy. He wondered whether he was burning out, or had passed that stage without realizing it. No heart left, just grey ash around a nub of charcoal? It was possible—he couldn't remember ever crying over the work. Though perhaps he had a century ago.

"Okay, a victim without enemies. My favorite sort." He sensed a minor ripple of resentment. Though Sergeant Nellis remained stolid, others were listening—the incident-room setup in Browall's Police Station was less than spacious.

For an instant, Maston wavered, the human, vulnerable side of his nature whining that he was tired, too tired. His mouth opened to call Dave Howarth—let the Inspector shoulder the load—but Dave Howarth was setting up the incident room and making sure that the relevant logs were opened, procedures commencing. The Browall men had taken courses and knew the theory, but there was a gulf between that and practice. Inspector Howarth had to bridge it.

Two hours, Maston consoled himself. Dave will have it sorted by then. Come on, you're a big boy—shave of a morning, go to bed with women, the whole deal. Act like an adult. His face registered no uncertainty. It was the face of a cynical, callous man unlikely to lend money or offer sympathy.

Detective-Sergeant Nellis was waiting. "Mrs. Steers," said Maston. "She was married. Let's start there . . ."

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Kate Steers had been nearly twenty-six years old when somebody smashed her head in from behind. She was married to—inevitably—a nice young man. Andrew Steers, not quite a year older than Kate, had money. Or rather, his father did. "Amounts to the same thing," Sergeant Nellis opined. "Very close family, the Steers are. Peter Steers owns the Quayside Hotel and the new shopping arcade behind it. He set Andy up in business."

"This will just about shatter the poor old bugger," Inspector Chapple rumbled. He had just entered the incident room, bringing in an autumnal reek of chimney smoke and frost. Chapple was a big man, senior uniformed officer in Browall, and a friend of Maston. "I took it on myself to break the news to Peter Steers—he's chairman of the town council." Thus, Chapple did not bother to add, capable of causing the police much trouble if encouraged so to do.

"I believe the old man loved Kate as much as his son did." Inspector Chapple raised a ham hand hastily: "Nothing unseemly, mind, but he and Mona always wanted a daughter, and when their boy married Kate they got an ideal one."

Nodding impatiently, Maston steered the Inspector into a corner and lowered his voice. "You know the form. Wife gets topped, go for hubby first."

"I won't argue," said Chapple, "but Andy Steers is on his way back from Glasgow now. Kate was seen getting off the bus at three-thirty this afternoon, on her way to her in-laws' house. She stayed with them when Andy was away on business. The old folk were nervy about her being alone at night. Mona Steers, her mother-in-law, phoned us at five in a panic. You could set your watch by Kate, she said. The old girl had rung the bank where Kate worked and confirmed that she'd left at twenty past three to catch her usual bus.

"Sergeant Nellis had a call to make out by the Steers' house, so I asked him to drop in and smooth Mrs. Steers down. Sharp chap, Nellis. He drove very slowly along the lane, spotted something reflecting his headlamps from the grass verge—the deceased's shiny leather handbag—and found the body in the ditch. That was at five thirty-five P.M. I phoned Andy Steers' hotel in Glasgow and reached him there just before six this evening." Chapple's large hand swung up again. "Yes, it was definitely him on the phone."

Maston grinned wearily. "You always were a spoilsport. Okay, scratch the husband." He leaned closer. "Don't tell me about nice girls, please. A snap impression, but I daresay it will stand up: this wasn't about robbery or about sex. Just about killing her. It gives

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me no pleasure, mate, but before this lot is sorted I bet she'll turn out to be not so nice."

He was wrong.

"Three days," said Maston, "and I'm limping about the circus ring with one foot stuck in a bucket of nothing."

"Frustrating," Inspector Howarth agreed.

"Bloody disgraceful. It's getting away from us, Dave."

"Not for want of trying, boss. We've taken a million statements, done the house-to-house, given a spin to every nutcase and creep in the county."

Maston wasn't listening. For some reason, the niceness surrounding the undeniable nastiness of Kate Steers' violent death impressed him as nightmarish. She and Andrew Steers had lived in a nice bungalow a couple of miles outside the town. Her parents had not appeared—her father was in a geriatrics nursing home in Cornwall these days and her mother was bedridden and living with a sister nearby.

Peter and Mona Steers, the parents-in-law, appeared to have been niceness personified. Both were shellshocked at present—Mrs. Steers dithery, her husband grey-faced and laconic from grief. Certainly they lived in a nice house, depressingly so. Maston, interviewing them in a furniture showroom of a living room after walking through several more of the same, nostrils flaring at the subtle reek of fresh paint and new carpets and too much spray-can polish, had never felt more of a slob.

As for the widower—

"What do you make of young Andrew Steers?" he demanded.

"A bit bland, a bit shallow. Had it too easy?" Howarth suggested. "Not much backbone, all surface."

"All on top," Maston pounced. "You picked that up as well. Hiding something. Or holding something back."

"Hang on." Inspector Howarth was mildly alarmed. "I only meant— We're older. Even if we weren't in The Job, we'd be used to people dying. I mean, I lost my dad a few years back and Iris's mother hopped the twig a year after we got married. My time of life, I've been to a few family funerals. Andy Steers doesn't seem to have got the hang of bereavement, that's all I'm driving at, boss. That black tie and mourning band on his sleeve look a bit fancy-dressish to me. Oh, he's shaken, and horrified that Kate was killed like that. Only maybe the lad isn't quite sure how shocked and horrified he

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ought to be. I don't say he puts it on, but I get the vibes that every now and then he just acts the part."

Maston said moodily, "Pity I can't bust him for counterfeit emotions. You're right, of course. There's no depth to that young man—no heart to speak of. Ever stop to think that 'nice' women like Kate Steers rarely get the husbands they deserve? Young Steers is sorry she's dead, but I think he'd be almost as sorry if his cocker spaniel had been run over by a bus. If he had a cocker spaniel."

"But he didn't kill her, boss."

"Could have paid somebody to do it." Maston cocked an eye at Howarth. "It happens. But no, Andrew Steers hasn't got the guts for that. Nor the contacts. Nice people, respectable. God save me from nice people!" He cracked his knuckles. "It's getting away from us," he repeated.

Inspector Howarth nudged him. "I believe somebody is trying to catch your eye—"

Glancing up, Maston saw Inspector Chapple hovering at the incident-room door. He wasn't built for hovering, but Maston divined that wasn't the reason for Chapple's unease. The big man mimed the raising of a glass.

Something told Maston the invitation wasn't wholly social. "I'm seeing a very important contact, Dave—slipping away to the pub across the road."

They crossed Market Street in silence and entered the Farmers' Arms. Alerted by Inspector Chapple's jerk of the chin, the publican lifted the bar flap and gestured the two men through to his snuggery. He brought in a bottle of Scotch, a jug of water, and two tumblers on a tray. "Shut the door behind you, Archie," Inspector Chapple directed. "I'm in conference. No calls."

"Just enough to cover the bottom, and lots of water," Maston warned as his friend grasped the bottle. "So this is your branch office. Chief Constable would love it, Charlie."

Inspector Chapple did not respond to the teasing. He covered more than the bottom of his own glass, tossing it back without relish. "Could be I've been here too long. Or I've started seeing what isn't there. I'm too near my pension to find out which—so I shall dump it in your lap."

"You always were generous, Charlie."

"Shut up and let's see if I can get this straight." Chapple scratched his greying head. "Remember I told you about breaking the news to

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Peter Steers the other day? I wanted Mona to hear it from him and not one of my chaps. Peter thought the world of Kate and so did Mrs. Steers." Head on one side, the Inspector listened to himself. "He *did* think the world of her, that's what throws me."

Maston broke a growing silence. "What are we saying here, Charlie?"

"Have patience. I contacted Peter's son first. Once I confirmed that Andy really was in Glasgow, and explained why he had to get back at once, I went to see Peter Steers. I tried the Quayside first. His office is on the hotel's ground floor. He'd already gone home.

"So I went out to the house, and as luck would have it Peter answered the door to me. He'd been looking out of the dining-room window, wondering what was going on down the lane there. Our people had set up lights and the ambulance had just pulled away. I made him step out onto the porch where his Missis couldn't hear, and broke the news.

"He went a funny color, the way they do sometimes, but got a grip of himself, thanked me. He was still stunned—left the front door open. I watched him trudge down the passage to the kitchen. Mona Steers was in there." Chapple turned the whisky bottle so that its label faced him. He aligned a tin ashtray with the edge of the table. "Ever since, something's been nagging me. Like those competitions they used to run in magazines— 'What is wrong with this picture?' "

Apparently at a tangent, he inquired, "What did you think of Mona Steers' palace?"

Humoring him, Maston gave a considered answer. "Cost a few bob, and lets you know it. Decorated every eighteen months, new carpets and furniture every—what, five years?"

"You're not wrong," said Chapple. "Mrs. Steers is—houseproud hardly describes it. With time on her hands after the boy married, that house became even more of an obsession.

"It embarrasses Peter, gets him down. I go there once a month or so, you know, for a game of bridge. Mrs. Steers doesn't play. She's always jumping up to empty ashtrays, open windows, shut windows, twitch a wrinkle out of a curtain. Not very comfortable, actually. You get the strong impression that she yearns to plump the cushions while your backside's still on them. When you walk on her precious carpets, she winces.

"She makes Peter put his slippers on at the front door. If she had the nerve, she'd have visitors walking about in their socks as well. That was what was wrong with the picture the other night.

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"Steers implied, if he didn't exactly state, that he'd been home for quite a while. I checked, casual-like, at the hotel. He left just after three P.M. the day Kate was killed. It would take him no more than a quarter hour to drive home. Say the town had its biggest traffic jam in history that afternoon, not that we did, it would still not take longer than half an hour.

"But when I turned up at his house just before half six, he was still in his outdoor shoes. Either he'd only just got back or he spent the best part of three hours on those precious carpets of hers without changing into slippers. That's not possible, if you know his wife and the setup—she would have been nagging within five minutes."

Maston considered the matter: it might mean nothing, or very little. Except that Inspector Chapple was worried about what could be taken for a distressed old man's confusion over timing. Below the surface of that overt train of thought ran another. Kate Steers' doting father-in-law was physically capable of killing her. Maston couldn't conceive of a motive for it, however. He said tonelessly, "We'd better go back and bring Dave up to speed on this. From memory, Peter Steers claimed that he got home around five-thirty P.M."

"Here you go, boss." Inspector Howarth extracted a single typed sheet from one of his box files. "It's on the computer, but this is what Mr. Steers, Sr. signed. He was at his office until half past four or so, spent a little time in the yard at the back of the hotel checking his car, and reached his house at half past five. He took an indirect route to avoid traffic, so he came in by the road from west of town and didn't drive up the lane where, by that time, his daughter-in-law's body was lying."

"Any cross-bearings on this? Confirmation of his story?"

Stricken, with a momentary air of a lined forty-year-old schoolboy caught out, Inspector Howarth knew better than to bluff. "No, sir. He was a non-suspect making a routine statement. Mrs. Steers, now—" He delved once more. "This is it: all the stuff about getting worried, calling the station, et cetera. 'My husband returned and was about to go looking for Kate when Inspector Chapple came.' Nothing about timing. I'll go to the hotel, sort out exactly who saw him drive away and when."

Maston turned to Inspector Chapple. "I'm getting a search warrant, Charlie."

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Inspector Howarth had the post-mortem report ready. "Wound inflicted by a heavy metallic object, possibly a tire-iron or some tool of that kind. Measurements—I'll photocopy this page for you, boss."

Chapple said, "I want to be with you when you tackle Peter Steers."

"To see fair play, Charlie?"

"Grow up—I just know him better than you do. You're a good reader of people, but I happen to have been reading this bloke for years and years."

Hiding relief, Maston nodded tautly. Inspector Chapple was having another look at the pathologist's findings. "Rum sort of shape, the weapon, from the measurements here. A tire-iron would hardly have the weight. Steers has an old car, a Green Label Bentley, lovely thing. Keeps it in the stable block behind his house. With a full set of workshop tools. Could be worth checking them, when you have your warrant."

From a distance, Peter Steers looked bald. Closer, it turned out that his skin was much the same shade as the thinning white hair. He looked ill, his lips blue— "Aged twenty years, overnight," Inspector Chapple muttered—and the watery, heavily pouched grey eyes were bloodshot from weeping or lack of sleep.

He was sitting on a bench in his garden when they confronted him, overcoat and bowler hat giving the odd impression he was a visitor to his own property. He showed neither surprise nor interest in the three policemen's arrival.

Inspector Chapple glanced at Maston, cleared his throat, and began, "Mr. Steers, there is a discrepancy in the statement you gave following your daughter-in-law's death. You said you left your office at four-thirty or thereabouts, remained on hotel premises for another half hour, then drove home. That was not the case."

Steers either shrugged or shifted position on the bench.

Inspector Howarth, studying his notebook, reported without particular emphasis, "Your secretary, Miss Webber, tells me that as you went out a motorbike courier came in with a valuable package. He entered the delivery time, three-oh-six P.M., on the receipt Miss Webber signed—she showed me the duplicate. You were on your way downstairs when she got that package."

Frowning, Steers seemed to concentrate. "The office— I may have left the office when you say. But I was in the hotel, checking things in general."

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"No, sir. Not that afternoon." Howarth turned a page. "The hotel cellarman saw you drive out of the yard at about quarter past three. And a Mr. Briers moved his car to let you out. He's a salesman, and having lots of calls to make that day he was paying attention to the time. When he backed up and watched you turn into the main road, it was coming up to quarter past three. It can't have been much later, because Mr. Briers made his next appointment at the Seacaster Arms by half past three and Seacaster is four miles along the coast.

"Mr. Steers, you made a false statement concerning your whereabouts at the time of the killing. Your whereabouts are unaccounted for. You had time to attack the victim, clean blood, tissue, and hair from the weapon, and dispose of it."

Peter Steers did not comment.

Now Chapple and Howarth looked to Maston for their cue. But studying the old man, he merely gestured them to proceed.

Inspector Chapple brought his hand out from behind his back—to display a flimsy, clear plastic box of the kind used to protect costly bouquets. This one held a stubby little mallet, handle of oil-grimed wood, the black-painted metal head a cube some three inches square. Peter Steers, vaguely querulous, protested, "You've been messing about with the tools for the Bentley!"

Chapple had to clear his throat again. "This tool has been washed recently, Mr. Steers. Look, the old scratches in the paint are rusty. Recent rust. A blonde hair is caught where the head fits the shaft—you missed that one."

Maston, hitching his trousers to preserve their creases, dropped into a squat beside the bench. "We could go on like this, sir. But you value your daughter-in-law, her good name, eh? And valuing it as you do—well, we might get things wrong. About her and you. Why you felt obliged to ki—to end her life."

Peter Steers, incisive for the first time during the encounter, leaned closer. "Send them away."

When the others had stepped back, Steers pleaded, "Can we keep this out of the papers?"

Nonplussed, Maston's lips moved silently for an instant. Guessing his plight, Steers turned irritable. "Not about me, you fool. About Andrew's philandering. Does it have to come out about my blasted son . . . ?"

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Jeannie, Maston's wife, was incredulous. "The old brute killed her just to stop a bit of gossip?"

Maston, back home at last and lying in the bath, shook his head tiredly. "Peter Steers is no brute. Just off his head. Kate, his son's wife, was a nice girl and it was the death of her.

"She was far too nice to dream that young Steers was cheating on her. All those business trips north of the border were to see his bit on the side. A bonnie Scots lassie. A pregnant lassie who was pressuring Andrew to ditch Kate and marry her, give the baby a name."

Heaving himself up, bath-foam matting his chest, Maston grimaced. "Andrew told his dad all about it, how his mistress was the love of his life, the grand passion. Kate had been a mistake which he was determined to put right. But unbeknown to all parties, Father Steers had become mentally unsound. So he didn't react in a normal way.

"He was sane enough to know his son for a spoilt-rotten, selfish little sod who was bound to get his own way in the end. The other thing he was certain of was that the smashing of the marriage would break Kate's heart."

They looked at each other. "He killed his daughter-in-law to—to stop her feelings being hurt?" Jeannie said.

"Yes, it made my flesh creep, too," Maston admitted. "But it made perfect sense to the old man. He saw it as the best solution—the most humane answer, in his sick estimation. The terrible part is, he really did love that girl."

"Huh! Then he'd have done better to kill his wretched son instead."

Maston shook his head. "Wouldn't work. Do that and Kate would still be bereft. She loved her husband, remember. The scary part of this damned business is that Peter Steers still believes he did the right thing. His way, Kate will always have been happily married, never knowing she'd been betrayed and was about to be humiliated and disillusioned. To the last, Steers was fixated on that. He begged me to keep his son's unfaithfulness secret because he wanted no stain on Kate's memory. He simply couldn't bear her exposed as being duped and discarded by Andrew. She wasn't killed to prevent small-town scandal over adultery and divorce—it was to shield her from the truth."

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Jeannie chanted, almost to herself, "Too good to live." And when her husband's eyebrows rose: "They used to say that at school, taunting anyone who was a bit pious or priggish, a teacher's pet. Only for Kate Steers, it was her death sentence. How awful."

"I'll tell you something worse. Not-nice Andy Steers scoops the pool: he gets to marry his mistress, who helped trigger the whole thing, and steps into his father's shoes now, running the family business."

Maston, towel kilted around his hips, announced, "I'm no good with nice people. It will be great to get back among real villains and know where I stand."

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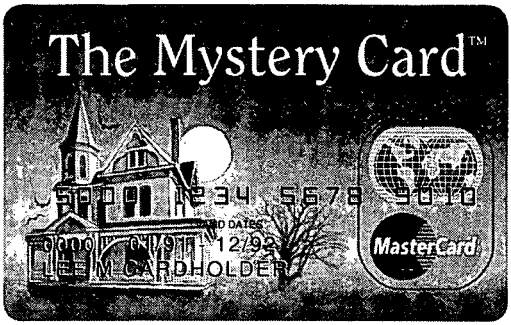

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"Mercy," Dieter said carefully, "what you did was commit a murder."

"No," she said quickly, "it wasn't. I just did what Cal wanted me to . . ."

MERCY'S KILLING

by BARBARA OWENS

Outside, rain fell cold and hard, what the locals called a gully washer. Dieter Francke was comfortably dozing through the 10 O'Clock News when his brother-in-law, Tim Shales, called from the sheriff's office.

"Hate to bother you on a night like this, Dieter, but you might want to come over. Sheriff's bringing in a woman claims she's killed her brother. You know the Webbs, live out east along Skinner's Creek?"

Dieter blinked, still half asleep. "I don't think so. What happened?"

"All we know now is she called in and said she shot him. If he's dead, this'll be one sorry case, Dieter. That's why I called."

"And she asked for me?"

"Naw, this particular woman won't know she even needs a lawyer. Come on over, see for yourself. Just keep it quiet I called you, okay?"

"Okay." Dieter's brain was starting to click. "Tell the sheriff I'm on my way, and that no one's to talk to her until I get there. Sorry case, you said? Hope I won't be sorry you called me, Tim."

He left a note for his sleeping wife and went out to brave the rain, adrenaline already pumping. If the guy was dead, this would be his first murder case. The town would have to take note of him. Peering

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through sheets of water at deserted streets, he tried to remember a family named Webb. In a place the size of Hadley, surely he'd heard it, but his memory was drawing a blank.

The county-jail building was squat and square. Tim looked up from his desk when Dieter came in, shaking rain from his coat.

"They just got in. Sheriff's waiting in his office. I told him you called, but I didn't say how you found out."

Dieter pitched his dripping coat across a chair. "Well, this had better be good. I had to swim part of the way here."

Tim's serious expression didn't change. "It's the real thing, Dieter. Cal Webb's dead. She got him with a double barrel to the head."

"Okay." Dieter was already on his way toward the sheriff's closed door. "What's her name?"

"Mercy. And she hasn't been around much. Go easy."

Sheriff Wes Parker answered Dieter's rap at the door. He looked faintly amused. "You picking up police calls now, Francke?" he asked in his deep bass drawl.

Dieter couldn't see past the bulky body blocking the doorway. "No, sir," he answered evenly, "but word manages to get around."

Parker's eyes flicked past him, settled on Tim Shales. "I expect it does. Well, come on in."

The woman was huddled in a wooden side chair, a thin cotton jail blanket drawn over her shoulders. A worn print housedress clung wetly to her. Dieter instinctively recorded the expression in her faded blue eyes—flat and frozen, like some small road animal trapped in the glare of oncoming headlights. Her body was slight and bony, as shapeless as a child's. Greying, limp wet hair. Stubby little hands with swollen knuckles, worked-hard hands. They clutched a thick coffee mug without knowing it. A ghostly, used-up woman, could be anywhere from forty to sixty-five. Mercy Webb didn't look strong enough to lift a shotgun, let alone fire it.

Dieter met the sheriff's eyes. "She been read her rights?"

Parker nodded. "She's already told me all about it, though. And she didn't ask for a lawyer first."

Dieter turned a smile on her. "Well, she's got one now if she wants me."

"How about it, Mercy?" Parker asked. "You want to talk to Mr. Francke here?"

For the first time, she stirred. "I don't know. You think I ought?" The voice was small and dry, scarcely audible.

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"Might be a good idea," Parker said. "I'll just leave you two alone for a minute." He went out, closing the door behind him.

Dieter opened his case on the sheriff's desk, moving slowly, letting her get a good look at him. Her eyes followed his every move.

"You look cold," he said finally. "How'd you get so wet?"

Mercy set her coffee mug on the desk and folded her hands together in her lap. "Don't have a phone," she told him. "I walked to the neighbor's. That's more'n a mile."

He pulled a chair close to her, holding his friendly smile. "My name's Dieter. You don't know me, but you might know my wife Jan, Tim Shales' sister?" When she made no reply, he leaned toward her. "I'm here to help you, Mercy. We have to talk about what happened. It's all right for you to tell me. I'm on your side."

After a short moment, she sighed. "Well, what happened is, I killed Cal. But he said it would be all right." The hands in her lap knotted together. "I don't believe I need a lawyer. Don't see how I could pay for one, anyhow."

Dieter eyed her carefully. It looked like Tim was right—the woman had no understanding of her situation. "Look," he said, "don't worry about money now. Before the sheriff comes back in, we have to decide how to get you out of this. Now, who said it would be all right? Cal? Why would he say that?"

"The letter." She fumbled in a worn black purse on the chair beside her. "He said all I'd have to do was show it."

"Letter?" Dieter repeated.

She pulled out a crumpled sheet. "I already showed the sheriff. Cal said the letter would explain things. That's why he wrote it."

The paper she handed him was a page torn from a cheap tablet, undated, the few words scrawled across it in pencil by an unsteady hand. Dieter read it twice, a cold fist clenching in his gut: "Don't blame Mercy. I made her do it. A man shouldn't have to live this way." The signature was clear—Calvin Baxter Webb.

Dieter's mouth went dry. "Live what way?"

"Crippled like he was. His legs. Cal was in a car wreck about five years back. Out West somewhere—Nevada, I believe it was. Him and two other men. They was both killed. Anyhow, it made Cal one of those—" she sounded out the word carefully "—paraplegics. He's been going downhill ever since. Lately he just couldn't sleep or eat good, and he started pestering me to do it—you know, put him out of his misery."

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Dieter looked at her with a sinking sensation. What had he gotten himself into? A mercy killing? As tough as cases get.

"But," he managed finally, "he had the use of his arms. He could have done it himself. Why involve you?"

Her gaze slid away from him. "He said he was scared. He might botch it and have more hurting. He worked it all out for me to give him a big dose of his sleep medicine and—" Mercy's eyes crept back to him "—and do it while he was asleep. So that's what I did."

Dieter's sinking sensation sank. Plain and simple, the woman didn't think she'd done anything wrong. His brain searched for a way out.

"Can we prove that Cal actually wrote the letter?"

Mercy looked surprised. "Well, I watched him write it. I was there."

Swell. Defendant backs up defendant's confession. He tried another tack. "Mercy, when Sheriff Parker read you your rights, did you understand that you didn't have to tell him anything without an attorney present?"

The hands in her lap twisted slowly. "He said that, but I didn't see any sense in lying. See, I'd already called and said I did it, hadn't I?"

"Well, think about this. Now that you look back on it, is it kind of a blur? Maybe you didn't really realize you were killing Cal. Think you could say that?"

Mercy thought for a minute, then shook her head. "I remember it clear. Cal and me went over and over it. He didn't want me to do it wrong."

"Mercy," Dieter said carefully, "what you did was commit a murder."

"No," she said quickly, "it wasn't. I just did what Cal wanted me to."

Dieter suppressed a sigh. "Why? Why did you do it if you didn't want to?"

"I just told you," she responded patiently. "Cal wanted me to. I was supposed to take care of him."

Dieter went out to summon the sheriff. "This won't take long," he reported grimly. "She's going to flat out admit it. I can't shake her."

Parker nodded. "You familiar with the family?"

"No."

"Well, you're going to learn some things. Most important is that Mercy there has always done what she's told." He laid a big hand

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on Dieter's shoulder. "Come on, let's go in and get it over with."

Over breakfast the next morning, Jan listened with sympathy and understanding. "Well, I'm glad you're going to defend her. That poor old thing deserves the best."

Dieter looked up, surprised. "You know her?"

"Nobody really knows her, but we all know about her."

"So, tell me."

"Well, she hardly ever steps foot off that place out there. She nursed her father for years, then Cal. Ask the guys who sit around the Drop-In drinking coffee. They'll know. And talk to Tim."

Dieter stared into his coffee. "How do I know they'll talk to me? I'm not the most popular guy in town."

Jan squeezed his hand. "Look, you're still the young hotshot lawyer who came down from Chicago and married the hometown girl. They don't dislike you, hon—they're just cautious, waiting to see what you're made of."

"I thought I'd like living in a small town," he groused. "Do some real good."

"And be a bigger fish," she said slyly.

He had to grin. "That, too."

"They'll talk because of Mercy," Jan said with confidence. "Trust me. She's one of us."

"Well, I've been here over a year. How many more before *I'm* one of us?"

Jan laughed. "Oh, about a hundred. Listen, you could wind up being the big man who gets her off. Go on now—get out and talk to people."

The president of the Hadley Bank, Hollis Graham, verified the letter's handwriting as Calvin Webb's. "I've been looking at that signature for a good many years. No question in my mind."

"I have to ask this," Dieter told him. "Tell me if you don't want to answer without proper authority. How will Mercy benefit financially from her brother's death?"

"Not a bit. Matter of fact, Cal's disability was mostly what they lived on, and that'll stop now. She'll get a few extra dollars in the bank and that old place where she lives. If you've seen it, you know what it's worth." Graham hesitated. "Mr. Francke, you let me know if I can be of any help. This town thinks a lot of Mercy Webb."

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At the 10:00 A.M. bail hearing, Dieter got a firsthand look at the man who'd be prosecuting. In his day, Matthew Robbins had been a fiery opponent for any man, a high-power from Springfield. He was old now, but still firmly entrenched behind his tunnel view of the law. He reaffirmed this in their brief meeting.

"Don't even mention bargaining," he began before Dieter could mention it. "From my first look at the case, I feel sorry for the woman, but murder is murder and that's what we're going for. I'm asking for life."

"Have you met her?" Dieter queried with faint hope. "There's special circumstances here."

The old man flashed a sharp, lipless smile. "My position is inflexible on this, Mr. Francke."

The minister from the Methodist Church posted bail. He looked like a minister should, with a round, cherubic face, and he grasped Dieter's hand firmly before departing. "Mercy isn't a member, but the congregation volunteered this contribution. She's close to our hearts. Do right by her, Mr. Francke." Dieter assured him he would try.

Dieter drove Mercy home through a countryside fresh from the rain. In the daylight she looked even more worn, fine lines etched deeply into her featureless face. She kept her hands folded in her lap and her head turned away from him, issuing occasional soft directions as they drove.

"Do you understand there's going to be a trial?" he finally asked her. "I'll explain everything to you as we go along. If you have any questions, just ask."

She kept her face away from him. "Then I guess Cal was wrong, wasn't he?"

"I'm afraid he was. But don't worry. We're going in with a strong case." He wished he could believe it.

The car lurched and bumped down a narrow rutted lane, along ditches choked with weeds. At its end stood an aging, two-story house, weathered shingles feathering paint. The front porch leaned to one side, the yard was rough and unkempt. Not one flower or spot of color lightened the grimness. Dieter looked across to catch Mercy's gaze.

"Dad never saw much need in keeping things up smart," she said simply.

As she opened the door, he leaned toward her. "Are you going to be all right out here?"

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"I've always been out here," she said.

He watched her through his rearview mirror as he started back up the lane. Looking neither right nor left, she marched through the yard, up the sagging steps, and vanished inside.

"Cal was older than me, but I remember him," Tim said. He had invited Dieter to the Drop-In Cafe for coffee. He seemed unaware that everyone in the narrow, converted railway car was watching surreptitiously. "There was only him and Mercy. Let's see, Cal must've been about fifty, Mercy's probably forty-five. The mother died when they were just kids. Cal took off the first time while Mercy was still in high school—she just stayed on and took care of things. Then old man Webb had a stroke about fifteen years ago. Bedridden and paralyzed—should've been in a home, but he wanted Mercy to take care of him, so she did."

Dieter glanced down at the big table near the door, holding maybe a dozen men, most in overalls, all talking quietly. Hard men, weathered from years of work in the outdoors. Several were watching him. He smiled, got a quick nod or two in return, and looked away. Tim was paying no attention.

"The family never had two nickels at the same time, but Cal didn't do a lick of work that I know of. He was gone for years. We heard he got into some trouble now and then, spent some time in jail. Don't know what for. Then he got hurt about a year before the old man died, and he came home for Mercy to take care of him, so she had the both of them for a while."

"Alone?" Dieter asked incredulously. "Wasn't there anyone to help her?"

Tim shook his head. "Some folks offered, but the old man and Cal didn't want anyone else around. I remember even as a kid I thought Mercy looked old and beat down. She never had a chance, Dieter. First one, then the other, kept a big foot on her, just squashed her spirit right out."

Without turning, Tim called over his shoulder, "Willis? You got a minute?"

A tall, sun-browned man detached himself from the group at the big table and came to stand silently at theirs.

"You know my brother-in-law, Dieter," Tim said. "Dieter, this is Willis Fry. We were just talking about Mercy, Willis. Wasn't it your brother wanted to marry her?"

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Willis Fry nodded solemnly. "John. About broke his heart. Mercy wanted to, but old Herm wouldn't let her: she was to stay home and take care of him. She didn't have it in her to stand up to him. John went off to Vietnam and never come back."

Suddenly three more men were gathered at the table. "Heard you went to see the banker," one said. Dieter nodded. "He tell you Herm left everything to Cal when he died? Not a cent for Mercy. Cal could've done right and changed things, but he didn't."

"No," Dieter said. "I didn't hear that."

"Mercy can't even write a check," another volunteered. "Cal had it all in his name."

There was a short silence. Six men were now banked around the table.

"Nobody thought much of Cal," Willis said finally. His eyes fastened on Dieter. "It's too bad he got crippled up that way, but he sure was hard on her. We're hoping you intend to get her off."

Dieter felt a small fire flicker to life somewhere inside. Mercy deserved it—he was going to do just that. "I'll try like hell," he said.

First one, then several hands reached to grip his. Hard hands. Willis Fry's was last. "You need anything, you ask."

Then they were gone and Dieter was grinning across the table at Tim. "Thanks," he said. "Pretty smart, coming here with me. I owe you one."

Tim grinned back. "You need all the help you can get on this one, Dieter. A lot of people are counting on you."

Cal Webb's doctor confirmed Mercy's appraisal of her brother's physical condition. A gentleman of the old school, Sam Phillips had been Hadley's chief medical practitioner for more than thirty years.

"When he first got back home, Cal swore he'd walk again," he told Dieter. "Said he had to, to get out of this hellhole. I couldn't convince him otherwise. That poor girl waited on him hand and foot, both of them when their dad was still alive. There were plenty of things Cal could do for himself if he wanted, but he wouldn't try. I think finally accepting his condition only made him meaner. Cal wasn't much of a man, if you want my opinion."

"Mercy said he'd been going downhill lately," Dieter said. "Was he deteriorating?"

"More like quitting, I believe. Last spring he started having trouble sleeping, was losing weight, just letting himself atrophy. I tried to get him out of there into someplace where they'd force him into

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physical therapy. Let Mercy have a rest, too, but he wouldn't go."

Mercy's neighbor had lived on the next farm since she and Cal were born.

"Well, she looked a bit scared when she come to use the phone that night," he remembered. "But calm, like it was something she was supposed to do."

He told Dieter she'd always been a quiet girl, even when she was small. "After her mother died, Mercy just stepped in. Herm worked her like a mule. I don't believe she ever had one day of fun."

"Did they farm?"

"Some. Herm wasn't good at farming. After he got down, he rented out the land. The whole family was odd, Mr. Francke—never took much with neighbors." The man's eyes darkened. "When the creek flooded last spring, it come up in their basement. Me and my son went over to help clear it, but Mercy said Cal didn't want us on the place. Said he told *her* to do it, so I guess she did."

The fire inside Dieter was licking hotter. "I'm getting an angle," he told Jan. "I don't know if I can pull it off, but I'm convinced Mercy didn't understand the consequences when she put that double barrel against Cal's head. She was simply doing what she was told."

Jan looked thoughtful. "Are you talking some form of diminished capacity?"

"She did what she was told," Dieter repeated. "She had no resistance."

"Pretty tricky. Matt Robbins will jump all over you."

"I don't have to convince Matt Robbins. I have to convince the jury."

His biggest fear was that Robbins would ask for a change of venue, recognize the pulse of public sentiment. But something in his gut told him that Robbins was old, nearing the end of his career, and was out of his element in Hadley. Maybe he'd get careless, confident of his reputation and scornful of Dieter's inexperience. Although painfully aware of his shaky footing in the town, Dieter knew he was closer to being one of their own than Robbins was. He decided to gamble and do very little to rehearse Mercy for her trial.

"Tell the truth," he instructed her, "just the plain truth. Be yourself. Matt Robbins will be hard on you. He'll try to fluster you, get you to say things you don't mean. Hang onto your head, Mercy. Tell what happened and why, that's all. A lot of other people will be on the stand backing you up. And I'll be right there with you."

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They were sitting in the dark, cheerless living room of her house. Mercy listened carefully, her thin shoulders bowed. She had brewed him a cup of bitter black coffee and he sipped it while he surveyed the room's worn, spartan furnishings, the bare wooden floor. At the foot of the steep stairs to the second floor, the door to her brother's bedroom—the room where he died—was closed.

Mercy cleared her throat. "Well," she said in her dry little voice, "I never expected any of this. I was counting on Cal's letter to fix things."

"The letter will help," Dieter assured her. "We know what Cal wanted. Now we just have to show that to the jury."

Early-winter sunlight streamed through the wavy glass of the windows. "It was really tough on you, wasn't it, all the care you gave your father and Cal?" He was testing her. "Was Cal difficult to get along with?"

She looked away. "He needed a lot of things," she said finally, and that's all he got from her. All Matt Robbins would get, too, hopefully.

His inner fire was blazing. All he had to do was show the jury this woman had no ability to make decisions and he was home free. Finished with his coffee, he straightened. "What will you do when it's over?"

Mercy looked surprised. "What do you mean?"

"Maybe you could take a little vacation. Go away for a while."

Mercy ducked her head. "Mr. Francke, I've never been outside this county."

"Then it's time. Don't you have family? Someone to visit?"

"Well," she said after a minute, "I've got an aunt in Tulsa."

Dieter beamed. "There you are."

For a minute he thought she was going to smile, and he wanted to see that. Then her eyes clouded and the swollen fingers picked at the fabric of her dress.

"I don't know if there's enough money to pay for all this," she said. "I can't be thinking about going anywhere."

"Hey, we'll work it out," he assured her. "You think about it, okay?"

As the trial date neared, Dieter saw it coming together. Robbins had not requested a change of venue, so he'd been right in his assumptions. Robbins merely planned to shoot into town, blow away the local talent, and shoot back out again. Dieter smiled inside. He couldn't pretend to be unaware of his growing favor in town. People

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stopped him on the street to ask how things were going, and when he stopped by the Drop-In for coffee he was greeted and invited to join the men around the big table.

"I'm going to pull it off," he told Jan, exulting.

She eyed him with a grin. "Don't start running for senator yet," she warned. "First you've got to get her off. If you don't, we'll both have to leave town."

Dieter deliberately dressed down for court. Hair a little shaggy, top shirt-button open under his tie, he wanted the jury to remember he was no out-of-town attorney. Matt Robbins, in sharp creases and high polish on his shoes, was quick to take notice.

"Nice try," he murmured in passing. "But it's still murder. Reasons don't count."

From the first day, Dieter gave it everything he had—after all, he and Mercy were both on trial. Witness after witness testified that Cal Webb was pretty much worthless: he neglected his family and took advantage of them, he had bragged about his scrapes with the law. Several concerned citizens had tried to convince him to share his small inheritance with Mercy, but he refused. Dr. Sam Phillips was effective in picturing Mercy's caregiving.

"She lifted those men, bathed them, cleaned up after them, fed and medicated them, and in all the years I've known her I never heard her complain."

Voices rose to attest to Cal's refusal to allow a phone in the house or to maintain the upkeep of the farm. And he wouldn't let anyone help Mercy in any way.

Mercy was sensational on the stand. Small, faded, and forlorn, she looked bewildered by the proceedings, huddled into herself, but her story came out honest and true, her wispy voice mesmerizing the packed courtroom as she described the details of her one violent act.

Only after Cal begged, cried, and offered to write the letter did she finally give in. Together, they rehearsed his plan. She put the sleeping medication in his supper—he asked for pork chops and sweet potatoes, and that's what she gave him—then when he was so deep asleep she couldn't rouse him, she put the double barrel to his head.

Matt Robbins was fierce in cross-examination, his scenario that she'd finally snapped after the years of sacrifice and simply wanted to be rid of him, but he couldn't sway her from her simple story: Cal

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wanted to die and she couldn't deny him. When she finished, looking exhausted but dry-eyed, there wasn't a sound in the courtroom.

Dieter's summation presented a woman who had always been in prison, a loveless place that had drained all the life and independence from her. Yes, she helped plan it and, yes, she executed the plan. "But make no mistake," he told the jury, fixing them with his eyes. "Look at her. To this day, she doesn't fully understand what she's done. Mercy Webb didn't know that the law wouldn't recognize Calvin's letter exonerating her. She believed him. In her mind, Calvin Webb *was* the law."

When he looked behind the expressionless faces, he saw the outcome. He'd done it. Mercy was set free.

"Is it over?" was all she asked when the verdict was rendered, and at his answer he finally saw her smile, saw the sparkle light up her eyes. As people crowded in to congratulate him and comfort Mercy, Matt Robbins reached to shake his hand.

"You're lucky, Francke. You'd never have gotten away with that on my turf."

Dieter shrugged, smiled, and said nothing.

Robbins was already packing up, heading out. "I expect I'll be seeing you again."

Dieter grinned. "Who can say?"

Then Jan was hugging him, and there were people waiting—his people, wanting to shake his hand.

Mercy insisted that he accompany her to the bank to determine the amount of her assets, and she paid him the full token billing he had submitted as his fee. She was indeed planning to visit her aunt in Tulsa. When word got out, the Methodist Church took up a collection and presented her with luggage for the trip—one large suitcase and a hefty carry-on. Dieter himself saw her onto the bus.

"Don't be nervous," he assured her. "Just ask the driver if you get mixed up about anything. Is your aunt going to meet you?"

Mercy nodded. "I can't believe I'm going," she said, sounding breathless.

"Everything's different now. You have a good time. Come tell me about it when you get back."

He felt like a million dollars at least when she started up the steps and he handed her the heavy new carry-on bag . . .

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Once settled in her seat, the bus moving under her, Mercy glanced at the heavyset woman beside her. The woman smiled and Mercy smiled back.

The carry-on was under her feet on the floor, supporting her short legs. A smile still lifting the corners of her mouth, Mercy turned her attention to the window and the scenery skimming by outside.

When you get back, Dieter Francke said. Not hardly.

If she wiggled her toes a bit, she thought she could feel the bundles of money stuffed inside the carry-on clear through the soles of her shoes. Almost a quarter mil, Cal bragged.

The bus picked up speed. The heavyset woman pulled out a magazine—Mercy was safe to stare through the window and have her little smile.

She thought it had gone pretty well. She'd gotten scared that night when Dieter told her the letter wasn't enough, but she'd managed to hold on and not give things away. After all the trouble she had getting Cal to write it, she was really counting on that letter.

"You won't get away with it," Cal had told her after she locked him in his bedroom and starved him for five whole days. "I'll tell somebody—the doc next time he comes."

By that time she was so mad she wasn't afraid of him any more. "Then I'll tell him about the money and they'll get you, Cal."

When he was finally so weak he could barely raise his head, he wrote what she told him to. Then she fed him—not much, just enough.

The mad started when he sent her down into the basement during the flood last spring to look for a little trunk he'd hidden there. She wasn't to look inside, he said, just bring it up so it wouldn't get wet. But when she lifted it, the top popped and she saw the money—stacks of it all wrapped in plastic. And the mad just jumped up and hit her, moved inside her like another person. Cal didn't want to tell her where it came from, but she starved him a bit and he finally did.

"Me and these two guys robbed an armored car in California. They almost caught us and we got separated. I made it away with most of the take. Remember the year I came back at Christmas? That's when I hid it down cellar—thought I'd wait a while, then come back and get it and go somewhere for a high old time. But those boys tracked me down in Nevada. They was taking me out in the desert to work me over till I told where it was. When we got to fighting in

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the car, that's when the wreck happened. Them boys didn't make it."

The mad had such a hold on her that she couldn't breathe. "And we've been living like this, not even a phone, while that money was down there all this time?"

Cal just looked back at her with his mean eyes. "I thought my legs would work again. Besides, it's not your money. It's mine."

Well, enough is enough. It took her awhile to figure out how to do it and get away with it. Once she hit on the idea of the letter, Cal begged her not to, said they'd take the money and go somewhere else, hire someone to take care of him. But the mad was telling her what to do. She could've just given him a heaping dose of the sleep medicine, but she wasn't sure how much to use. She might botch it and Cal would still be alive. Dad's old shotgun seemed like a sure thing.

The bus was crossing a river. Mercy watched with interest. Mr. Robbins had scared her again when he dug into her at the trial. Seemed like he was getting close to what really happened, but she remembered what Dieter told her—hang onto your head. She did, and here she was.

Mercy wiggled her toes against the money. Lucky she'd had Dieter. He'd really helped things. He never once asked flat out if she murdered Cal. She probably would have lied, but it was a comfort that she hadn't had to. It would have been a real shame to lie to such a nice man. His idea to take a vacation even helped her find an easy way to get out of town.

Of course, she didn't have an aunt in Tulsa. When she got there, she'd just take a bus to somewhere else, travel around as long as she wanted to, settle down if she found a nice place. Seems like all that money should last a while.

When you get back. It made her smile. She turned away from the window and the heavyset woman caught her eye.

"Got a long ways to go?" the woman asked.

"Seems like," Mercy said, wiggling her toes. "When you're just starting out."

"Q"

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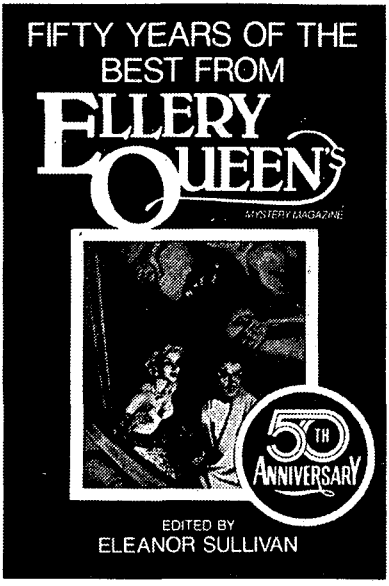

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a *NEW* short story by

JANWILLEM van de WETERING

Suzuki danced a wounded bird, flopping about between the pine trees and ornamental bushes, shrieking in agony, trying to stretch its broken wings. The commissaris noticed how heron-like Suzuki was himself, with his wavy silver hair brushed up over his ears so that it tufted backward, with his long arms that perfectly imitated wing movements, with narrow trouser legs and tall-shafted tight boots, stepping about stiffly . . .

HERON ISLAND

by JANWILLEM van de WETERING

"You want me to confess?" Professor Suzuki asked through his interpreter, Toshiko. "I wasn't here in Amsterdam, Holland, when it happened, commissaris-san, I was in Kyoto. And confess to what? To a crime? But the crime is the murder of my own son, my only child, and it was the French couple that did that, the skinheads, arrr . . . Ninette, and arrrr . . . Pierre, yes, *yes*, commissaris-san?"

"Mere instruments?" the chief of detectives, a neat little old man, asked politely enough. He was at an advantage of course, entrenched behind his huge antique desk. He was at home, so to speak, at Amsterdam's Police Headquarters, a far cry from his visitor's Kyoto, the exotic temple city, the pure heart of Japan; although, Suzuki had told him just now, industry was polluting even Kyoto, darkening the sky above perfect copies of T'ang Dynasty Buddhist buildings, extinct in China since the Cultural Revolution, but duplicated perfectly in the land of the Rising Sun.

"Saaah," Suzuki said, admiring a giant blue heron, preening blue and silver wings on a branch of a century-old elm tree outside the

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commissaris's open window, stretching its snake-like neck, croaking musically. "A rare bird."

"Herons aren't rare," the commissaris said. "In fact, they're a pest. All over the city. They get so bad that we put up signs to warn our good people not to walk under their trees. A good splat ruins clothes. It's the canals that attract our thousands of herons, and the recession, of course. You see, we have all the unemployed now, who like to fish, so Amsterdam stocks her canals with minnows and the unemployed yank the fish out and feed them to the herons."

"So desu ka?" the motherly young Toshiko twittered, too surprised to translate. "Is that so? Herons are *very* rare in Japan."

"I thank you, commissaris-san," Suzuki said, "for solving my son's murder. It is terrible indeed when a man's sole biological successor is killed criminally, and his body is cut up, and found in a trunk, floating in . . . arrrr . . . Brewer's Canal, was it?"

"Yes," the commissaris said, sharing a relaxed coffee ceremony with his guests, handling the heavy silverware deftly: pot, jug, bowl—handing out cookies.

"*Oishiiii,*" Suzuki and Toshiko said, "tasty."

"Brewer's Canal," Suzuki said. "It may be fitting that my son departed there. He did like beer."

"You drink alcohol yourself?" the commissaris asked.

"What?" Suzuki stared over the rim of his coffee cup. "Oh . . . no, don't care for drink . . . but Koichi had the bad gene, his mother's. You know—" the professor spoke in an exaggeratedly youthful voice, which Toshiko immediately imitated in English "*—Out of beer, out of luck . . . All beer is good beer.*" He spoke in his own voice again. "My son's favorite sayings."

The commissaris glanced at polaroids on his desk. Some were of a dismembered corpse, one showed Koichi alive, standing on an Amsterdam gable house's stone steps, between sculptured granite lions, squinting awkwardly. The commissaris thought the young man's sullen looks could be due to more than being hung-over. Koichi looked disturbed—the way he held his head to the side, as if someone was about to slap him, defensively raised hands, a too eager smile. The underdog, the commissaris thought, the pathetic creature rolled over on its back signaling: "Please don't hurt me."

"What should I confess to?" Suzuki asked. "Please, commissaris-san, tell me what happened, from the beginning if you please . . . oh . . . Koichi, my son . . . "

"I told you," the commissaris said.

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The heron in the elm tree half raised his huge wings, as if intending to float down easily to cool its feet in Moose Canal below, then croaked musingly. The elm tree offered shade. The summer day was hot. He could claim his fish later.

"I tell you, yes?" Suzuki said. "Koichi didn't like to travel, he just drank, in bad bars, so I wanted him to expand his mind, to travel. I sent Tadao with him, Tadao, youngest son of my colleague Sakai . . . arrrr . . . Sakai and I are professors, medical men."

"You paid the trip for both your son Koichi and your colleague's son Tadao," the commissaris said.

Suzuki shrugged. "I am well off. I invested, locked in on my profits a long time ago." He stared at the heron, folded his hands, bowed to the creature.

"There are no Japanese herons?" the commissaris asked.

"We only keep Japanese on the islands now," Suzuki said. "Other lifeforms are dying out in Japan." He looked down at the commissaris's oriental rugs, then up at oil portraits of ancient Dutch constabulary captains, smiling down from red faces.

There was a silence, first soothing, then disturbing. Toshiko broke it. "Not all wildlife is dead. There are sanctuaries, commissaris-san. The professor owns Heron Island on Lake Biwa, close to Kyoto. It is very famous."

"The snow monkey sanctuary in Hokkaido is famous," Suzuki said, "nobody ever heard of my insignificant effort."

"Your son Koichi," the commissaris said, shaking a pathology report from a plastic file and arranging its pages neatly next to the polaroids, "died of an overdose of pure heroin."

"A new vice," Suzuki said. "To add to the drinking. I worried about my son. I thought a change of environment . . . "

"Amsterdam heroin," the commissaris said, "often comes pure."

"Well," Suzuki said, "so you're saying my son's unnatural death was an accident? I don't think so. Dealer Pierre knew that Koichi wouldn't be able to handle that injection. Malicious foresight, neh? They robbed him, neh? Pierre and Ninette. You jailed that bad couple?"

"Pierre is dying in the jail's hospital now," the commissaris said. "Withdrawal sometimes does that. Users are in bad shape, they haven't eaten for a while, living on the drug only, and then, when the drug is withheld, the shock kills."

"Ninette too?" Suzuki asked.

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"Holland is short of jail space," the commissaris said. "We released her to the custody of her family, in Paris. Pierre prostituted Ninette. She's in a clinic, recovering nicely."

"Good girl at heart?" Suzuki asked suspiciously.

The commissaris lifted a thin, almost transparent hand, smiling gently. "What's *good?*"

"What's good is what's good for *us,*" Professor Suzuki said, thumping his chest.

The commissaris smiled. "For the surviving lifeform?"

"Hai," the professor nodded.

"The polluting lifeform?" the commissaris asked.

"Arrr . . . " Suzuki said.

"Arrr . . . " the commissaris said kindly. "I don't believe holding Ninette improves the common good."

The heron outside, alerted by the professor's loud voice, lifted a wing and croaked loudly. Suzuki's face twitched as he moved forward in his chair. "Listen, police-officer-san. Ninette bought the trunk with a traveler's check taken from a dead body to purchase a trunk to get rid of that same body. My only son's dead body. You yourself told me so. That's how you caught Pierre and Ninette. They killed Koichi Saturday night in their loft on Blood Alley, and Pierre, a butcher by trade, bled and cut Koichi's corpse. You told me that the stores here are closed Sundays and Mondays. The trunk, found floating in Brewer's Canal late Monday, was new. Your detectives traced the vendor at the street market, which is open on Monday. He'd taken a hundred-dollar American Express traveler's check in payment from a French female skinhead. You knew, because Tadao told you, that Koichi and he had been drinking with a French skinhead couple in Blackbeard's Bar at Blood Alley that Saturday night when Koichi disappeared. The connection was clear. Your detectives traced the French couple to their loft and their search produced more of Koichi's traveler's checks." Suzuki's voice squeaked indignantly. "Yes, commissaris-san, *yes?*"

The commissaris coughed. "Please. I'm sorry, Suzuki-san, I really want you to make that confession." He blew his nose. "Excuse me. It's better for you. You will feel relieved."

"You want to arrest me?" Suzuki asked. "You're kidding . . . arrrr . . . you can't hold me on nothing. I was halfway across the globe when Koichi died. How could I kill him?"

The commissaris smiled. "I won't arrest you."

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"I'm a medical man," Suzuki said, "I serve the common good. Why do you blame me? For sending my only son to Amsterdam, with a friend to protect him?"

"I just want you to clarify your motivation," the commissaris said. "I am not blaming you. Besides," he gestured gently, "you did nothing illegal."

Suzuki held up his hands. His eyes blazed. "So why this confession?"

"To clear your mind," the commissaris said.

"For the common good?" Suzuki asked.

The commissaris nodded.

"I don't follow you," Suzuki said. He turned to the pleasant-faced Toshiko. He muttered furiously. "Suzuki-san," the interpreter, stepping out of direct-voice mode, said briskly, "says he doesn't follow you."

"Tell Suzuki-san," the commissaris said, "that he does. Tell him I want his confession. Tell him I won't arrest him. Tell him he can go home."

Suzuki got up. "Confession first," the commissaris said. Suzuki sat down.

"Perhaps, if we go through the events again . . . " the commissaris said.

"Okay . . . " Suzuki said. "Where are we now? My unemployed son Koichi and his friend Tadao Sakai, a medical student, vacationing in Amsterdam, visit a bar. Koichi drinks. Tadao abstains. Blackbeard, who tends bar, sells Koichi marihuana. Koichi smokes the joints. Tadao does not. A French couple, in leather clothes, with shaven skulls, enters Blackbeard's Bar. The couple indulges too, sidles up to the rich Japanese tourists. Pierre offers drugs that he keeps in his loft. Koichi leaves with the French couple. Tadao returns to the hotel alone. Koichi doesn't show on Monday morning. Tadao informs our ambassador, a Kyoto native who happens to be an acquaintance of mine. The ambassador alerts the police."

"More coffee?" the commissaris asked.

Suzuki's trembling hand made his cup clatter on its saucer.

The commissaris poured.

"What do you want of me?" Suzuki asked. "Yes, I know I accused Tadao of kidnapping Koichi, when the ambassador phoned me in Kyoto. I overreacted. I've explained the situation: my colleague Sakai has been losing a fortune on the stock market. He's back in debt, his house is mortgaged to the hilt again, the continued study of his

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four sons is in jeopardy. I'm the rich guy. I first hear my son is missing, then that his dismembered body has been found floating about in a trunk. I don't know about a French couple. I do know about Tadao. Maybe Tadao had Koichi tied up in some basement here and wanted me, in return for my son's release, to pay for his, Tadao's, studies, or maybe I was to finance Tadao's father's debts. I imagined that Tadao might have killed Koichi by accident, by binding him too tightly. It could be, couldn't it? And Tadao studies surgery, he knows how to cut up a human body . . . to get rid of the evidence?"

"Really . . . " the commissaris said, shaking his head. "Really, professor . . . "

"Far-fetched," Suzuki said. "I know. Tadao is a good boy. Besides, my hypothesis was unlikely, as you explained. There are no empty basements in Amsterdam, the city is overcrowded. Besides, Japanese are conspicuous foreigners here. How could one conspicuous foreigner molest another? Wouldn't someone have noticed? Wouldn't you have been informed?"

The commissaris sipped coffee.

"You didn't arrest Tadao," Suzuki said. "You want me to confess to accusing an innocent party? My motive is jealousy? Very well. I confess." Suzuki thumped his knee. "Why does my associate-professor Sakai, my inferior, Sakai the foolish gambler, have four excellent sons who study hard, four heirs to have pride in, and why am I damned with misfit Koichi?"

"Thank you," the commissaris said.

"Can I go now?" Suzuki asked.

"That was only the first part of the confession," the commissaris said.

Suzuki was shouting. "You want me to admit to manipulating Koichi to die by sending him here to Amsterdam, a magic city of sin, where dangerous drugs were bound to reach him? That I was sure that Koichi would go for heroin? That he would surrender to that evil French couple? Show them his roll of traveler's checks? Set himself up to get murdered?"

"We dropped the murder charge," the commissaris said. "There is no evidence of conscious planning. These things mostly just happen, you know. There's no proof that Pierre knowingly injected an overdose into a willing client. We have Tadao's testimony: Koichi was bragging he was used to heroin."

"Pierre should have noticed that Koichi didn't inject," Suzuki said.

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"You think Pierre checked Koichi for needle marks?" the commissaris asked. "In a dark loft in the early hours? Everybody is drunk and stoned already, and Pierre has just wandered all over Amsterdam looking to buy heroin and needles, not easy products to purchase, even here?"

The heron was looking at Suzuki. Suzuki covered his eyes. "Kudasai . . . kudasai . . . "

"Please . . . please . . . " Toshiko translated.

Suzuki dropped his hands. He stared at the heron. "I protected you, remember?"

"You're almost there," the commissaris said.

Suzuki was calmer, sitting back, hands clasped on knees. "It hurts too much to tell you my truth."

The commissaris smiled helpfully.

"You know why the truth hurts?" Suzuki asked.

"Because we cover it up by lying to ourselves?" the commissaris asked. "But lies are transparent. The truth moves underneath, it keeps wanting to get out."

"It twists about in pain," Suzuki said.

"So?" the commissaris asked.

The heron had flown away. The commissaris looked out of the window, beckoning his guests to join him. Six stories below, the bird stood next to a man in a red hat, dangling a fishing rod above Moose Canal. Man and bird.

"I love birds," Suzuki said. "Koichi hated me. He wanted to hurt me. He was drunk, he was on my island, shooting my birds."

"What had you done to him?" the commissaris asked.

"I didn't marry his mother," Suzuki said. "She gave him to me after my wife left me. Koichi's mother hates me too but she thought I would pay for a good education. I paid for everything. Koichi wasn't grateful."

"Should he have been?" the commissaris asked.

Suzuki raised a shoulder. "Maybe I pressured him, eh? Pushed too hard, maybe? Wanting him to do well? Wanting to show off a good son?"

"Thank you," the commissaris said.

Suzuki danced, using the commissaris's large oriental rug as stage floor. First he danced Koichi, drunk, crazed, firing an automatic shotgun. Then he danced a wounded bird, flopping about between the pinetrees and ornamental bushes, shrieking in agony, trying to stretch its broken wings. The commissaris noticed how heron-like

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Suzuki was himself, with his wavy silver hair brushed up over his ears so that it tufted backward, with his long arms that perfectly imitated wing movements, with narrow trouser legs and tall-shafted tight boots, stepping about stiffly.

The shot heron died, falling into the professor's chair. The professor sat up painfully, croaking: "arrrr . . . "

"I see," the commissaris said.

"See what?" Suzuki asked.

"I see what you mean," the commissaris said. "I'm very close to my pet turtle, dear little fellow who lives in my garden, closer than I am to humanity, perhaps."

"Now your son shoots turtle," Suzuki said.

"Now I kill my son?" the commissaris asked.

"So now what do I do?" Suzuki asked.

Both parties met once again, at Suzuki's invitation, at a restaurant facing the southern gate of Amsterdam's Vondel Park, a conglomeration of large ponds surrounded by clusters of trees and shrubbery that provide optimal habitat for the capital's many species of birds.

"Commissaris-san," Suzuki said, "I thank you."

"Are we done?" the commissaris asked.

Suzuki bowed. "My mind is clear."

"I'm glad," the commissaris said.

"So am I." Suzuki smiled. He touched Toshiko's arm. "My adviser here tells me that it's time to move ahead intelligently. She also tells me that intelligence is the capacity to make the best use of a given set of circumstances. I still have the island with a recovering population of splendid birds. With Koichi gone I have no heir. You told me that your detectives, when they visited Tadao at his hotel, found him developing photographs of herons, taken while he was hiking about in Vondel Park?"

"Tadao told Adjutant Grijpstra," the commissaris said, "who likes to paint waterfowl as a hobby."

"What style?" Suzuki asked. " . . . Arrrr, Hondecoeter's style perhaps, the old master . . . ?"

"The old master," the commissaris said. "Tadao told my adjutant that herons, in Japan, symbolize the ability to fly out to higher spheres."

Suzuki nodded.

"A sensitive boy," the commissaris said. "This Tadao."

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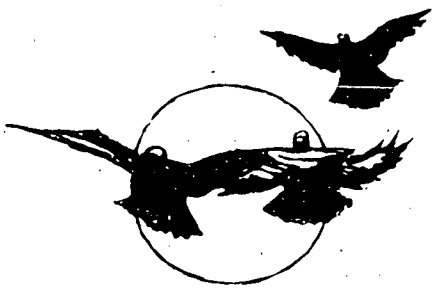
"My colleague Sakai would agree," Suzuki said, "to give me one out of his four sons. It would be beneficial to all parties. I would pay for Tadao's education, and maybe lend his father some capital to sort out his present mess."

The commissaris, limping slightly due to a rheumatic condition, leaning on a silver-tipped cane, walked Professor Suzuki and Toshiko back to the city's center through the park.

A giant blue heron, its long neck curved back gracefully, broad wings stretched widely, hovered effortlessly above.



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Angie Irvine's fiction debut in the Department of Firsts is marked by rather unusual circumstances. Her husband Robert Irvine launched his fiction-writing career in 1973 on these same pages, with the story "Lobster Shift." But that is not the only respect in which the author has borrowed from her husband's experience. So intimate has Ms. Irvine become with her husband's Moroni Traveler books that they have taken on a separate and vivid life in her own imagination. A spin-off of the Traveler series, this tale takes us back to the early 1950s when Moroni Traveler was just a boy, and his hell-bent father, P.I. Martin Traveler, finds a heap of trouble—and mystery—in an Indian medicine bag . . .

FEEL THE POWER

by ANGIE IRVINE

A bunch of the boys were whooping it up down at the Eat Well Cafe. They weren't too rowdy because Utah is a dry state, but there was a lot of rough-house joking, and some of the guys had been nipping at private preserves before they came in. Not that they had that much to celebrate what with the mines west of town cutting back. Nobody was paying any mind to Walter Winchell as his voice droned on about the latest Broadway scandal from the battered radio next to the grill. Manny, as usual, was behind the counter dishing up the eats liberally laced with grease.

The sudden quiet made me look up from my beef pie with chili. There's a kind of fug that muddies the atmosphere of the Eat Well, and the sixty-watt bulbs don't help either, but it was plain enough that the three men who had walked in the door were Indians. Not that they were dressed that much different from the rest of us—a little shabbier, maybe. Manny would have said it was the smell, but then he's a prejudiced SOB. It probably was the way they carried

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themselves, as if they were testing the air for a hint of danger, or maybe they just didn't like our smell. The Eat Well can get pretty rank on a cold winter's night.

One of them approached the counter and started to count out a handful of small change.

"How much for a burger?"

Manny pointedly ignored him. One of the boys yelled out, "Heap wampum!" to a chorus of sniggers.

The Indian repeated his request in a quiet dignified voice.

"More than you've got," Manny spat, sweeping the change off the counter onto the floor.

The boys laughed as the coins rolled in every direction, and I noticed a couple of them sauntering, casual-like, over to the door, cutting off the Indians' retreat. The boys were bored, and they liked to have their little fun.

Things were going to get ugly, I could tell. Now I'm not a big guy, but I'm considered pretty tough. You'd have to be a fool, though, to take on this bunch. Still, if you can't fight them all, you can do it one at a time.

"Cole," I called out to the leader of the pack. "You've been dying to get a crack at me. Well, it's now or never. Your choice."

"Martin," Cole rumbled, momentarily distracted from the prospect of Indian bashing.

I didn't give him a chance to think it over but walked to the nearest table and sat down. Elbow on the table, hand up, I challenged him. "Put it there."

Now Cole Jurgens is six-foot-two, weighs two-twenty, and is younger than me. They say that a good big man can always take a good little man, but they weren't talking about arm wrestling. A lifetime of hard work and daily tennis has left me a legacy of a strong right arm, among other things. "Fifty bucks says you can't take me." I knew that he couldn't resist.

Nobody noticed when the Indians left.

Fifty bucks richer, I walked down State Street toward the small office I rented in the Chester Building. I'd left my car there, rather than drive the few blocks to the Eat Well. When a man's living alone it's too much trouble to fix dinner: my boy Moroni is with my ex-wife in California.

It gets dark early in the winter, and the packed snow lay heavy on the sidewalk. The city fathers hadn't gotten around to rousing the municipal forces to clear the pedestrian ways after the last big

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snowstorm. It took me a while to figure out that I was being followed. I stopped under a streetlight and turned. Salt Lake isn't considered a dangerous city, but I always carry a roll of coins just in case. They can add a nice amount of heft to a well-placed punch. To my surprise, the Indian who had tried to get served stepped forward.

"Mister, I need to thank you. I understand what you did back there."

"No need. I didn't fight in the war to have that sort of thing going on back home. I'm sorry you didn't get your burger, though."

The Indian shrugged and turned to rejoin his companions. "Hey, wait a minute, fellow," I called out after him. "I do know a place where you can get a good feed, and they won't give you any trouble. It's not far from here."

The Indian shook his head and gave a short bark of a laugh. "I'm afraid our last attempt to get served cleaned us out."

Now I know what an empty belly feels like and I'm no stranger to being short of cash. What I knew that I could never understand was being an Indian in Mormon country. If you're not all "white and delightsome" you're not getting anywhere in this town. Even Catholics have a hard time.

"Look," I hesitated, "I'm kinda flush right now. How about I make you a loan. If you promise to pay me back, that is." I knew he wouldn't take outright charity.

He shook his head, but he hesitated. I took the fifty bucks I got off Cole and shoved it in his hand. It was all wadded up so he couldn't tell how much it was. "You can write me an IOU if it will make you feel better," I persisted, "but you don't have to. I trust you."

We were standing on the rim of the circle of light thrown out by the street lamp. I couldn't see his face any too good, but I could feel his fist tighten under my hand as it closed around the money. For a minute I wasn't sure if he was going to hit me or put the money in his pocket. Then the moment passed, and he shoved the money in his Levis.

"We're not beggars, but I thank you anyway," he said. "Here, take this." He untied something from around his neck and put it into my hand. "Take this, it's all I have of any value. It's strong, very strong. Feel the power."

"Sure, buddy. Fair exchange. It's the Wagon Lunch, over on 2nd East, by the way. A bit scratch, but good grub." I put his little medicine bag in my pocket and turned away. But for a moment I swore I could feel a tingling in my arm . . .

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The next day they found Manny's body in the alley behind the cafe. Ben Horne came around noon and heaved his large bulk into the overstuffed chair that I keep for clients.

"Morning, Ben. I can't ask you to take a seat since you already have. Come for a visit?"

"It isn't morning any more, Martin. And this isn't a social call."

He always says that, Ben does. He's never paid me a social call in his life, but we've talked plenty in his capacity as Chief of Detectives. He likes to hammer home that the relationship is purely business.

"Hear you were at the Eat Well last night."

"I'm at the Eat Well most nights, Ben. It's close to the office, it's cheap, and it's got the best chili in town. Burgers aren't bad either. You here about Manny?"

That took the wind out of his sails. It hadn't made the morning paper, but in some ways Salt Lake City is a small town. The tom-toms had been beating all day.

"How'd you know?"

"Information's my business, Ben, remember?"

"You're lucky I've got some mangy breeds locked up for the job, or I'd run you in."

I got a funny feeling in the pit of my stomach. Those Indians didn't seem like hotheads to me. And they didn't seem the type to lie in wait until the cafe closed. There just wasn't any need.

"What's the motive, Ben? You don't kill a man just because he wouldn't serve you."

"Robbery, probably. Found some money on them when we picked them up."

"About forty, fifty bucks?"

The color on Ben's face was something awful to behold. I thought about cracking open the safe and offering him a drink, for medicinal purposes of course.

"Martin Traveler, you have the right to remain silent. You have—"

"Come off it, Ben. I know about the money because I gave it to them myself. It was the winnings I took off of Cole Jurgens. You must know about that since you're sniffing around here asking me about last night. I guess it kind of blows your case, though, knowing that they got that money legit."

"Well it don't," he growled and slammed out of the office without asking me any more questions.

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I knew somebody at the public defender's office, and they got me in to see the Indians. I can't say they looked too good. The cops must have roughed them up some when they picked them up. I don't think they recognized me in the harsh jail light.

"Mister, we can't afford a private investigator."

"It's OK, you already paid me with this." I dangled the medicine bag in front so that they could see it. "And since I'm working for you, I ought to know your names. I'm Martin Traveler."

The guy who'd given me the bag spoke up. "I'm Charlie Redwine, and this is Joe Blackwing and Joe Morningstar."

"Why do they think you did it, Mr. Redwine?"

"Charlie, my friends call me Charlie. I guess you qualify. They found an Indian medicine bag in the dead man's hand. I tried to tell them it wasn't ours, but they wouldn't listen."

Chris Christensen had told me the same thing at the public defender's office.

"And after you left me, where did you go?"

"Just like you said. We went to the Wagon Lunch." He looked away. "We didn't figure on you giving us so much. So after filling our bellies, we figured we'd better go back home while we had the money to do it. Coming to the city to look for work was a mistake. We were at the Greyhound station when they picked us up."

"OK. I can't tell you not to worry, but I'll do the best I can."

The case against the three Indians really didn't hold together, and I knew that Horne would figure out that he had a weak case sooner or later. That didn't mean somebody higher up wouldn't be above some creative evidence development. The cops in this town like things nice and tidy.

I knew that I had to hurry up Horne's thinking processes. Ben wasn't the brightest guy I knew, but he was as honest as the day is long, and he had an itch for justice. Too bad he was such a hothead.

I approached his office hoping he was in a better mood than the last time. He wasn't, but the source of his discomfort was the sense that he was off the mark, and it wasn't going to get any better. That didn't mean he was going to admit it right away.

"Look, Martin, those guys had the means and the motive. Just because you gave them money doesn't mean that they didn't want more. I got guys out right now looking for where they might have spent money. And besides, they left their calling card."

"You mean like this?" I showed him my medicine bag.

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He got dead still but he didn't blow. "So what? Anyone can have a medicine bag or make one up."

"That's just my point, Ben. I got this one from Charlie Redwine. The other two had theirs."

He must have been itching bad just about then, but I could see his conscience struggling to throw it off. Finally he said, "Just suppose, for a moment, they didn't do it."

"Sure, Ben. In that case maybe we should look at some other factors. Not everybody knew there was an alley behind the Eat Well and not everybody knew that Manny used it after work. It could have been a chance encounter. But maybe it wasn't. It could have been someone who hated Manny real bad, or maybe figured he had money. He waited until Manny showed up and used a piece of wood lying in the alley to make it look like a spur of the moment attack. But it had to be someone who was in the Eat Well when the Indians came in and knew to leave that medicine bag. It had to be someone who was there when I was."

"There must have been close to ten, fifteen people there around that time."

"I've got a hunch, Ben. Will you string along with me to see justice done?"

"What have you got in mind?"

"I know a man who's mean enough and maybe hungry enough to do what was done. I just might have something he'd want to go after too. You know, once a man gets a taste of taking what he wants, it's kind of hard to stop. All you have to do is invest a little of your time. If he goes after me, you've got your man. If he doesn't, I'll work that bunch until one of them takes the bait."

I could see Ben thinking it over and maybe wondering what kind of trouble he could get in, especially if things went wrong.

"I know that you don't carry a gun, Martin, even though your license entitles you to apply for the privilege. I respect you for that, but this could be pretty dangerous. I could probably fix something up for you on an emergency basis."

I shook my head. "Thanks, Ben, but I've killed my share of men in the war. Really killed them, not lobbed some shell on a target a thousand yards away. Looked 'em in the eyes and shot them dead. I'm not ever going to do that again."

The Eat Well was open again that night. The murder had taken place in the alley out back so the building wasn't considered a crime

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scene. Hal Stenrude had come in all the way from Provo to keep the business going and he was behind the counter slopping grease and serving burgers like he'd done it all his life. Which he had, of course, before he'd gotten rich enough to hire Manny. Business was booming.

I took the last empty stool at the counter.

"What'll you have?" Hal didn't waste any time. He knew his business.

"Gimme some of your chili, Hal. Let's see if you do it any different from Manny."

"You know darn well it's my recipe and my instructions. A monkey could follow the directions." He lowered his voice. It was so low that I could hardly hear it over the din. "In fact, it's so simple that I'm thinking of hiring Cole over there to take Manny's place."

He seemed pleased by the surprise on my face, for his smile got a little smug around the edges as he continued. "You know that Cole's been out of work since Kennecott cut back. Well, he's real anxious and I can get him cheap."

"But Cole's a real mean SOB and he's stupid to boot." I must have raised my voice because the guy on my left gave me a funny look before he went back to wolfing down his fries.

"So was Manny, right down to the bone." Hal gave me a wink and went down the counter to take care of another customer.

I looked over the crowd and there was Cole, seated at a corner table. He was indulging in his favorite pastime, showing off how strong he was. I slid off my stool and sauntered over, just as he put some poor fool out of his misery by slamming his arm against the surface of the table.

"Looks like you're in good form today, Cole. Care for a rematch?"

He grinned and held up his hand in invitation.

"Not too tired after your last bout, are you?" I continued.

"Hell no, Martin. Sit yourself down."

We dickered a bit on the wager, but the outcome was the same. A fifty-dollar bet and I won.

"How about two-out-of-three?" Cole wheedled. He was in no hurry to fork over the dough.

I thought of asking him how he'd come to be so flush but decided to leave that to Ben.

"Sure, but let's make it interesting. How about we double the ante. Winner takes all."

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Cole was sweating some, but he gave me his sly grin and replied, "Sure, why not?"

Well, it never got to three, and Cole wasn't looking so good. "It ain't natural, Martin. A little guy like you. And you're old too." I guess a ten-year difference seemed old to him.

"You're right, Cole. I got me some help." I pulled out the medicine bag that Charlie had given me. "I got this."

"Why that's just an old Indian medicine bag. It's probably filled with dirt."

"No, Cole, not this one. It makes you strong. It's full of secret things. Here, feel it, feel the power." I put the little bag in his hand and clasped mine over it. "Can you feel it, Cole, in your muscles, in your arm? Can you feel them growing stronger?"

"Yah, yah I can." For a minute I thought he wouldn't give it back, so I kind of helped him along by pressing on his hand between the thumb and the index finger. You just can't naturally keep your hand closed if pressure is applied there. He got a kind of mean and ugly look when I took back the bag.

"I won't pay, Martin. You cheated. You had help."

"There's something to that, Cole. So I'll tell you what. Let's just forget about the bet. It's enough for me to know that I can beat you any time I want. As long as I got this." I put the little bag back in my inside coat pocket. "See you around, Cole."

I fooled around a little until the crowd thinned out and then made sure that Cole saw me leave. I didn't have long to wait.

He chose a dark patch between two buildings, but I was alert and ready. His footsteps were muffled by the snow, but the high-pitched whine as the still, cold air was rent by the swing of his baseball bat was loud enough.

When you're fighting big guys, always move in and under, but just watch out for the bear hug. Cole never had a chance. He got all the power that a weighted fist can deliver to the groin and I finished him off with another to the solar plexus. He was helpless by the time Horne jumped out of the car that had been tailing me.

"He went down like a ton of bricks. What did you hit him with?"

"My usual coin roll." I laughed and opened my hand to show him. Horne and I both stared. It's funny what adrenaline can do to your system when you're under fire. I thought that I had grabbed my coin roll as I turned to face Cole. My open hand revealed the little medicine bag instead. My arm still tingled from the punch. ●

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THE JURY BOX

by JON L. BREEN

The history of detective fiction has seen several examples of the multi-collaborator mystery novel. In most cases, the contributors each take one or more chapters, either with or without knowledge of what others are doing. The best-known examples are the Detection Club's *The Floating Admiral* (1931), to which an all-star cast of British Golden Agers including Christie, Sayers, Chesterton, and Berkeley contribute; and *The President's Mystery Story* (1935), in which a team of American writers (Samuel Hopkins Adams, Anthony Abbot/Fulton Oursler, and S.S. Van Dine the best known) take on a problem propounded by Franklin D. Roosevelt. (In a 1967 edition of the latter, Erle Stanley Gardner joins the game.) Two briefer Detection Club efforts that antedated *The Floating Admiral* were first published in book form in 1983 as *The Scoop & Behind the Screen*—again Christie, Sayers, and Berkeley are all involved with other well-known names. Similar efforts from the mid-fifties appeared in book form in Britain as *Crime on the Coast & No Flowers by Request* (1984), with John Dickson Carr, Christianna Brand, Gladys Mitchell, Anthony Gilbert, and Elizabeth (E.X.) Ferrars among those involved along with Sayers, who obviously loved this sort of thing. The Detection Club's rarest multiple collaboration must be *Double Death* (1939), with a slightly less distinguished roster, though still including Sayers and Freeman Wills Crofts—oddly, this volume to my knowledge never had an American edition nor was it revived as part of the Sayers vogue of recent decades.

Using the criminally significant name Theo Durrant, after a nineteenth-century San Francisco murderer, the Northern California chapter of Mystery Writers of America (among them Anthony Boucher, Lenore Glen Offord, and Darwin L. Teilhet) produced *The Marble Forest* (1951), though in this case who-wrote-what is never identified. *Caribbean Blues* (1988), from Bill and Karen Palmer's scenario, includes chapters by Mary Higgins Clark, Molly Cochran, Max Allan Collins, Gregory Mcdonald, Richard Meyers, Warren Murphy, and Robert J. Randisi. In *The Black Moon* (1989), Randisi masterminded a round-robin private eye novel to which Loren D. Estleman, Ed Gorman, W.R. Philbrick, and L.J. Washburn also contributed.

In the rarer type of multi-author novel, one writer sets a problem and a group of others attack it independently. The best-known example is another Detection Club effort, *Ask a Policeman* (1933), in which John Rhode describes a mysterious murder, four prominent writers set each other's sleuths on

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it (i.e., Anthony Berkeley writes of Lord Peter Wimsey, Sayers of Roger Sheringham, Gladys Mitchell of Sir John Saumarez, and Helen Simpson of Beatrice Bradley), following which Milward Kennedy produces an ultimate solution.

The latest example of this type (and what all this antiquarian commentary has been leading up to) is *The Perfect Murder* (HarperCollins, $18.95). Principal author Jack Hitt, in the person of a potential wife-killer (and Thomas de Quincey devotee) known only as Tim, asks five prominent mystery writers how to do the job while pinning the crime on his ostensible best friend (also his wife's lover) Blazes Boylan. Each of the criminous consultants—Lawrence Block, Sarah Caudwell, Tony Hillerman, Peter Lovesey, and Donald E. Westlake—does an ingenious job of structuring an elaborate perfect crime, but things really get entertaining when they are given the opportunity to comment on (and deflate) each other's ideas. This is a wonderfully humorous, sometimes subtly serious, one-of-a-kind book.

**** Barbara D'Amato: *Hard Tack,* Scribners, $18.95. The second novel about Chicago journalist Cat Marsala is a terrific example of both the locked-room mystery and the closed-circle whodunit. A dozen are aboard the luxurious yacht *Easy Girl* on Lake Michigan when storm, murder, and other disasters strike. The cast members are almost universally likable, so that virtually every one qualifies as a least-suspected-person candidate. The puzzle plotting, brisk telling, sailing action, and character drawing are all first-rate. The first Marsala novel, *Hardball* (1990) was impressive, but this one is miles better.

**** Michael Gilbert: *The Queen Against Karl Mullen,* Carroll & Graf, $18.95. The titular defendant is a South African policeman known as the Pencil Man—trust me, you don't want to know why—who is in London to seek the extradition of a black activist and is charged (initially) with shoplifting a rare book. This is a superbly-managed tale with a large cast, a wealth of twists, and an important theme. (If either the switch in publishers or a disparaging early review caused you to suspect Gilbert is slipping, forget it.)

**** Dick Francis: *Comeback,* Putnam, $21.95. The former jockey's thirtieth novel finds him near top form, as usual dispensing fascinating specialized information—this time on the British diplomatic corps and equine veterinary surgery—along with a masterfully controlled plot and a remarkably large cast of vivid characters. Concerning an inexplicable series of deaths among a top surgeon's racehorse patients, the novel continues a trend in Francis's work to less physical action and more cerebral detection. Narrator Peter Darwin is the usual likable and resourceful hero.

*** John Boland: *Easy Money,* St. Martin's, $17.95. With its seemingly ordinary but heroic narrator and its expert depiction of a specialized background, this first

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novel by an *EQMM* contributor and former *Barron's* editor is very much in the Dick Francis tradition. Money manager Ben McCarthy and his artist wife Marty are interesting characters, and the story is steeped in the machinations of Wall Street—like some sports novels, it will be of greatest interest to readers fascinated by the game it focuses on.

*** Crabbe Evers: *Bleeding Dodger Blue,* Bantam, $4.50. And here's one of those sports novels—I can't imagine a non-baseball fan wanting to read it any more than I can imagine a fan not loving it. L.A. Dodger manager Jack Remsen, closely patterned (in his public persona) on Tommy Lasorda, is the murder victim and old-time sports scribe Duffy House, a writer with the flair of Jim Murray or Red Smith, investigates. That the mystery plot is slight is easy to forgive. Duffy House is one of my favorite new sleuths.

*** Marcia Muller: *Where Echoes Live,* Mysterious, $17.95. San Francisco sleuth Sharon McCone, who debuted in *Edwin of the Iron Shoes* (1977), is credited with a pioneer's role among the new-style female private eyes. Here she travels to California's gold country to investigate a complex and satisfying ecology-related murder case. Complications in her personal life are equally interesting. This is an excellent series.

Two new original anthologies are of more than passing interest. Despite the implications of the title, *A Woman's Eye* (Delacorte, $19.00), edited by Sara Paretsky, is not entirely devoted to woman private operatives, but the big three—Paretsky's V.I. Warshawski, Sue Grafton's Kinsey Millhone, and the above mentioned McCone—are all here in strong new cases (call it a triple dead heat), joined by such other series sleuths as Julie Smith's Skip Langdon, Amanda Cross's Kate Fansler, Antonia Fraser's Jemima Shore, and Carolyn G. Hart's Annie Laurance Darling. Among the non-series entries is an evocative new story by the incomparable Dorothy B. Hughes.

The Crime Writers Association of Great Britain celebrate last year's Christie centennial with *A Classic English Crime* (Mysterious, $16.95), edited by Tim Heald. Contributions range from pure parody (including a riotous piece of mock literary scholarship by Simon Brett) to relatively straight Golden Age-style puzzles to one very serious and chilling story (Liza Cody's "Spasmo") set in Christie's thirties period and privileged milieu. First prize from my perspective was Susan Moody's Hercule Poirot pastiche (which also reminded me a bit of P.G. Wodehouse), "All's Fair in Love," embodying a misdirection Christie surely would have loved. But nearly all the contributors (a distinguished list including Margaret Yorke, David Williams, Julian Symons, Peter Lovesey, H.R.F. Keating, Paula Gosling, Celia Dale, Robert Barnard, and Catherine Aird) do a fine job of homage.

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a *NEW* Ben Snow story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

Considering the swampy area that surrounded it, the town of Seagull's Rest was on firm ground, a coastal sandbar that had built up over the centuries. There were probably about five hundred people living there, according to the stagecoach driver who delivered Ben on the final leg of his journey. "They're nice folks here, mostly fishermen and their families. Conservative, though. They always vote the populist ticket. Not like those crazy folks drillin' for oil up near Beaumont . . ."

FIVE DAYS IN A TEXAS TOWN

by EDWARD D. HOCH

By the year 1900 Ben Snow had made the decision to go east. A new century was dawning and the West as he'd known it had changed forever. He was forty-one years old and his horse Oats was nineteen. The West belonged to younger men now, and younger horses. Ben spent the summer and early fall of that year working on a small ranch in east Texas. The nice young couple who owned it were just starting to breed horses, and when they suggested putting Oats out to stud, Ben readily agreed. There were worse ways for a fine old horse to end his days. Oats didn't even seem upset when Ben left the ranch for the last time.

His plan was to take a train down to the Gulf Coast, and then over to New Orleans for the winter, working his way up the Mississippi to St. Louis in the spring. It was a good plan, but it didn't take into account a woman named Esther Flint and election day in a town called Seagull's Rest.

The town was located on the Gulf coast, not far from the Louisiana state line. The bayou country there, with its stagnant marshes and

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sluggish streams, was more akin to Louisiana than Texas. Ben Snow had traveled through the rich cotton country of east Texas to reach it, and the reason for this side trip was Esther Flint. He'd known her brother Hank briefly at the ranch where he'd worked, and Hank had asked him to deliver a special message to his sister if Ben was passing that way. "It's not the sort of thing you can write in a letter," Hank said, "even if I could write."

Considering the swampy area that surrounded it, the town of Seagull's Rest was on firm ground, a coastal sandbar that had built up over the centuries. There were probably about five hundred people living there, according to the stagecoach driver who delivered Ben on this final leg of his journey. "They're nice folks here, mostly fishermen and their families, though there are a few wealthy landowners who made their money in cotton farther inland. Conservative, though. They always vote the Populist ticket. Not like those crazy folks drillin' for oil up near Beaumont. That's where you should go, stranger."

Ben Snow smiled slightly. "Don't know the first thing about oil. Fishing, neither. I'm just here to pay a call on someone."

Hank Flint had told him his sister would be easy to find. She operated a little general store down by the beach and she was there most of the time. As it turned out, the store was easy to find but Esther Flint was a bit more difficult. "She's down by the water," the man behind the counter told Ben. "Can I help?"

"It's personal."

"You'll find her," the man said. "Esther's hard to miss."

Ben walked along the beach until he spotted a woman seated on a rock, gazing out at the Gulf waters. When he got close enough he cleared his throat and she turned. Esther Flint was a strikingly pretty young woman, hardly the sort Ben expected to find in a town like Seagull's Rest. Her long dark hair framed a perfect face, with high cheekbones and skin that glowed a bit from the sun's rays. Her eyes were deep and pale blue, as was the shirt she wore tucked into her dungarees.

"Pardon me," Ben said. "Are you Esther Flint?"

"That's me." Her eyes smiled at him more than her lips. "What can I do for you?"

"I knew your brother. He asked me to come see you."

"Hank?" She stood up, brushing the sand from her hands. "What about him?"

"I'm afraid the news isn't good. My name is Ben Snow. I hate to—"

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"Is he dead?"

"When I last saw him a couple of months back he was heading for Mexico. His insides were all messed up. The doctor didn't hold out much hope."

She accepted the news fatalistically. "Hank drank too much, even when he was growing up. He always told me he wanted to die in Mexico."

"I expect that's why he went there."

"Excuse me, Mr. Snow, if I don't show more emotion. I haven't seen Hank in five years, and we were never that close. He was always the older brother—ten years older. We had little in common. A person who was much closer to me died last week."

"I'm sorry to hear that."

"I came down here to think about her. She was a lovely girl, only twenty-six."

"Was it an accident?"

"She was murdered, Mr. Snow. Someone shot her with a rifle as she was walking home from work."

Ben hadn't expected to encounter violent death in a place like Seagull's Rest. There were still occasional men wearing pistols, as there were everywhere in Texas, but the murder of a young woman seemed completely foreign to the place. "No idea who did it?" he asked.

"Some drunken gunslinger, I suppose." She eyed the pistol he wore on his belt. "I wish they'd pass a law against people carrying weapons."

"I'm sorry to have brought you the news of your brother so soon after your recent tragedy. I told Hank I'd be heading for New Orleans in the fall and he asked me to stop by here."

"It's not your fault," she said, relenting a bit.

"You must have a sheriff here. Can't he find out who killed your friend?"

"No one ever asked Sheriff Renard to solve a real mystery. He and the mayor do barely enough to get reelected."

"I saw the signs coming into town. *Vote Populist–Reelect Mayor Whiting.*"

"It's his turn this year. The sheriff was reelected last year." They were strolling back toward the general store. "The election of '96 was pretty much of a debacle for the Populists in Texas, but a few

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of them still hang on, in places like this. The Democrats are getting stronger, though."

She seemed to know what she was talking about, and Ben decided she had brains to go with her looks. "I'm in no hurry to get to New Orleans," he said. "Let me talk to the sheriff in the morning and see how the investigation's coming. I've had some experience at these things."

"Are you a lawman?"

"Not officially."

They'd reached the store and the man behind the counter looked up as they entered. "Mr. Snow, this is Archie Johnson."

They shook hands and Johnson asked the young woman, "Are you feeling better?"

"Sure, I just needed some fresh air." She turned to Ben. "Both of us are having trouble getting over Margery's death. Archie was her boyfriend. They were planning a spring wedding."

Ben took another look at the young man. He had long hair and a bushy mustache that made it difficult to estimate his age, but he was probably younger than he'd first appeared. "Any idea who killed her?"

"Not a one. Everybody liked Margery."

"What was her last name?"

"Faraday."

Ben made a note of it. "Were you both here when it happened?"

"In the store," Esther Flint answered. "We were together when Sheriff Renard brought us the news."

"Where'd she live? With her folks?"

"Folks moved on a few years ago, headed west. She decided to stay here."

Ben turned back to Archie Johnson. "I'll see the sheriff in the morning."

Margery Faraday had been the town clerk, and her office was in the same two-story building as the mayor's. It was easy to tell that the town election was only three days away on this Saturday morning because there was a political rally in progress in a little park right across from the building. Ben paused for a moment to watch Mayor Whiting's rival, a bear-like man with white hair named Sid Bronte, wave his arms and promise a new tide of prosperity for Seagull's Rest if he was elected.

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The town clerk's office was closed, with a sign on the door directing people to the mayor's office down the hall. Ben followed directions and found Mayor Whiting himself, easily recognizable from the engraving on his campaign posters, standing by the window with another man. They were watching the rally across the street. When Ben cleared his throat both men turned. The mayor was wearing a white shirt without a tie, and Ben startled him so much he momentarily forgot to smile at a potential voter. The other man, closer to Ben's age, wore a string tie and a six-shooter on his hip. There was a sheriff's badge pinned to the front of his shirt.

"I'm looking for Sheriff Renard," Ben told them.

"That's me," Renard said, stepping forward without a glance back at the mayor. "What can I do for you?"

"I'm a friend of Esther Flint's brother. I stopped by to see her and she told me about the murder of her friend, Margery Faraday. Can you tell us anything about how the investigation's going?"

Renard shifted the gunbelt on his hip. "What'd you say your name was, stranger?"

"I didn't, but it's Ben Snow."

"You from these parts?"

"New Mexico."

"Nothing much I can tell you about poor Margery, except that somebody shot her dead along Gulf Street a week ago yesterday. It was nearly six o'clock, twilight, and no one saw a thing. As soon as we identified her I went over to the store and told Esther and Archie."

"Did she have a room on Gulf Street?"

Sheriff Renard snorted. "She was living at Archie's house. I thought you knew that."

"I knew they were going to be married."

"This is a God-fearing community, Mr. Snow. To some folks she was living in sin."

"Would one of them kill her for that?"

"Don't know. I'm working on all the possibilities."

Ben thanked him and went out the way he'd come. The mayor's office seemed empty, but a young man was just coming out of the town clerk's room. "Can you help me?" Ben asked. "I'm looking for someone who might have known Margery Faraday."

He smiled and said, "I knew her. Name's Jed Hawkins. I do surveying for the clerk's office."

"Ben Snow. It was a terrible tragedy."

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"That it was. Margery was a sweet young girl. I can't imagine anyone wanting to kill her."

"The sheriff said it was almost dark. Could it have been an accident? A stray bullet from somebody shooting a rifle into the air?"

"Everyone in town has their own theory. I suppose that's as good as any."

He picked up some surveyor's instruments and walked quickly away. A bit too quickly, Ben thought, until he turned and saw the sheriff watching from down the hall.

He walked down Gulf Street awhile before going over to the beach. It was the next street from Coastal, where Esther's general store was located, and Ben wasn't surprised to see Archie Johnson cutting through a vacant lot as he headed home. He followed him to a wood-frame dwelling halfway down the next block. As Johnson turned in, Ben called to him.

"Hello, Mr. Snow. Did you see the sheriff?"

"I did. He told me Margery was living here with you."

"It was no secret. She had to move a few months back, and as long as we were getting married anyway, I suggested she come in with me. We had separate bedrooms."

"Did anyone complain about that?"

"One or two of the old hens around town. Mrs. Sweeting was the worst."

"Could one of them have killed her?"

He smiled at the thought. "No, I don't picture Mrs. Sweeting handling a rifle. She wears black lace gloves most of the time."

"Margery died instantly from her wound?"

"That's right. A neighbor saw her fall and ran for the sheriff."

Ben Snow nodded. "Thanks for your help. Is Esther at the store?"

He took out his pocket watch. "She will be until three. She closes early on Saturday afternoons."

Ben arrived at the store just as she was locking the front door. He told her what little he'd learned from the sheriff, then asked, "What's there to do in this town on a Saturday night?"

"Usually there's a square dance somewhere, but tonight's different. Both Mayor Whiting and Sid Bronte are holding big political rallies. Do you have a favorite candidate?"

"Which one are you going to?"

"I hadn't planned on either." She met his eyes and turned quickly away.

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"How about going to Bronte's rally? If it's dull we can go to the mayor's."

"All right."

"Can I pick you up?"

She shook her head. "It's at the Odd Fellows Hall, right near me. I'll meet you there."

"What time?"

"I think Bronte is speaking at eight."

Ben remembered the stagecoach passing the hall shortly before dropping him off, and he found it without difficulty. He'd been staying at the only hotel, across the park from the town hall, and the walk to the rally was the sort of exercise he needed. There were about a hundred adults at the gathering, some with small children, and they'd come in a variety of carriages, on horseback, or simply on foot. He wondered how this compared with the mayor's rally.

Esther Flint was nowhere in sight by the time Sid Bronte's speech got under way, just five minutes late. Ben decided he'd been stood up, but he couldn't really blame her. Here he was, a forty-one-year-old stranger asking a woman in her late twenties to attend a political rally with him. If she was suspicious of his motives, he could understand it.

He tried to concentrate on Bronte's speech, catching the cutting remarks about the Populist rule under Mayor Whiting. "Fellow citizens, it is a new century, a new beginning! The Gulf Coast of Texas must keep up with the times. I'm a small landowner, like many of you, and I want to protect what I have. The fishermen, the cotton farmers up north, the new visionaries must all be protected. Mayor Whiting and Sheriff Renard must be told that the days of the Wild West are over. Texas, east Texas, Seagull's Rest, demands better than that. Vote the winning ticket on Tuesday. Cast out the Populists and give us a new start!"

He spoke for about thirty-five minutes, and as he finished Esther Flint joined Ben among the spectators. "Sorry I'm late," she whispered. "Come on up and I'll introduce you to him."

Esther wove a skillful path through the spectators and they were the first to reach Sid Bronte as he finished his speech. The candidate was obviously a friend of Esther's and they kidded a bit as she introduced him. "The job of mayor's wife is still open," he told her, "any time you want it."

"Come on, Sid!" She gave him a friendly punch on the arm. "Meet Ben Snow, a friend of my brother's."

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"How is Hank?"

"Not good, according to Ben. That wasn't news I wanted to hear so soon after Margery's death."

Bronte shook his head. "I talk about the days of the Wild West being over, but people like Margery are still shot in the street. I hear there was another one tonight."

"Who?"

"Don't know. Someone told me just before my speech."

Others were gathered around to speak with him so they edged away. Before they'd gone far Esther was intercepted by a stout middle-aged woman carrying a cane. "Ben, I want you to meet Mrs. Sweeting."

"My pleasure." He accepted her black-gloved hand.

"You're new here," she said, studying him closely.

"Just passing through on my way to New Orleans."

"That sinful place! I hear they publish a directory listing all the prostitutes in the city."

"I wouldn't know about that," Ben said.

"What did you think of Mr. Bronte's speech?" Esther asked, trying to change the subject.

"Interesting. I don't doubt it's time we had a new mayor. I just don't know if he's the right person."

They escaped from her as soon as possible and Esther Flint gave a little chuckle. "Sinful New Orleans! She probably thinks it's just the place for the likes of you!"

Ben smiled slightly. He liked being kidded by a good-looking young woman. "There's the sheriff. Let's ask him about this latest shooting."

Sheriff Renard seemed tired and distracted. When he saw Ben he asked immediately, "You been here for the whole rally?"

Ben nodded. "Since just before eight o'clock. We heard someone was shot."

"Jed Hawkins, the surveyor. Shot in the back of the head at close range."

"My God!" Esther said with a gasp. "Do you think it's connected to Margery's murder?"

"I doubt it. Looks like a robbery to me."

"What was stolen?" Ben asked.

"His boots. Looks like the killer shot him in the head and then stole his boots."

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Ben remembered meeting Hawkins at the town hall. He especially remembered that the young surveyor had been coming out of Margery Faraday's old office at the time. The sheriff might not think the deaths were connected, but Ben had other ideas.

"Was Jed Hawkins especially friendly with Margery?" he asked Esther as he walked her home.

"They knew each other, of course. Jed did work for the clerk's office. But they weren't especially friendly. She was with Archie whenever she wasn't working."

"It's odd about the boots. I've known men to be killed for their boots further west, on the trail, or in the desert. But why do it in town, where you can buy a pair of your own?"

"Maybe he couldn't afford it," she answered sensibly.

When they reached the small log house where she lived, Ben said, "I hope I see you again before I leave."

"You can see me right now if you want to come inside."

"That's the nicest invitation I've had in weeks."

She placed a hand on his shoulder. "I want you to stay here, Ben. I want you to find Margery's killer."

"I'll go see the sheriff again in the morning," he promised, following her into the house.

But the next day was Sunday and he had to look long and hard before finding Sheriff Renard at the funeral parlor with Jed Hawkins's body. "I tried your office," he said. "The deputy thought you might be at home."

The room was shadowy and at first he didn't notice the other figure standing in the corner. "The sheriff wouldn't be home with two murders to solve," Mayor Whiting said. "Not with an election coming up."

"I didn't see you there."

The mayor grinned. "I'm a hard man to overlook."

"I was wondering, Sheriff, if I might examine the clothing that Jed Hawkins was wearing when he was shot."

"Why'd you want to do that?"

"It's possible I could give you some help."

The sheriff glanced in Mayor Whiting's direction and his face hardened a bit. "Biggest help you could give would be to get out of town." He slipped a hand into his shirt pocket and took out a folded sheet of paper, flipping it in Ben's direction.

It fell short and Ben stooped to pick it up, aware of their eyes on him. The folded paper was an old reward poster with his picture on

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it. "That's out of date," he told the sheriff. "You won't collect a penny on me now."

"It was still in my file."

"Somebody once thought I was Billy the Kid and had these printed up. It was a misunderstanding."

"Then you'd better get out of town before there's a second misunderstanding."

"Maybe you've got something to hide, not showing me his clothes."

"Show him!" Mayor Whiting barked. "There's nothing to hide."

The sheriff disappeared through a doorway and returned in a moment with a cloth bag. Ben dumped the contents on the table. Everything seemed to be there except for the missing boots. He noticed some dried black mud on the pants cuffs and then the gold pocket watch Hawkins had been carrying, an engraved graduation gift from his parents. The glass was crushed and the hands had stopped at 8:17.

"That was the time he died," Sheriff Renard said.

"Why would the killer take his boots and leave behind a gold watch?"

"Scared away, probably. A couple of folks heard the shot."

"He had a case with his surveyor's tools in it. Did you find that?"

"No."

It was too soon to know if they'd been stolen along with the boots. Probably not. Hawkins would have had no reason to be carrying them around after dark. "Satisfied now?" the mayor asked.

"I'm satisfied."

"Then you'll be getting out of town like the sheriff suggested."

Ben smiled at him. "Oh, I think I'll hang around until after Tuesday's election. I want to help celebrate your victory, Mayor."

He walked over to Esther's general store next, but she wasn't there. Archie Johnson was busy unloading bags of sugar from a wagon out back. "We're not really open on Sundays," he told Ben. "Esther's probably at home."

He cut through the vacant lot to Gulf Street and then went on to Esther's log house, but she wasn't there either. He decided to get something to eat and try again in the evening. The town had settled down as the day progressed, though as Ben returned to Esther's street several hours later he could hear the beating of a drum far off in the distance. Somewhere a rally was still in progress, though the sun had set.

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There were no signs of life at her house and he started to turn away when he heard the hoofbeats of a horse coming up fast through the near-darkness. Ben saw the rifle in the rider's hand, silhouetted against the night sky, and went for his own gun. He was an instant too slow. The rifle butt struck the side of his head as the rider passed close to him, sending him toppling backward.

He rolled over on the ground, dazed, trying to reach his weapon. The rider reined up, turned, and started back toward him. Ben collapsed in the dust, motionless, expecting a bullet at any moment. "That was just a sample," the man above him said. "Get out of Seagull's Rest or you're a dead man."

Ben listened to him ride off in the night and then tried to rise. His head was still spinning and his vision was blurred. He sank back to the ground, thinking that in his younger days the man would have been dead before he'd ever gotten close enough to swing that rifle butt.

When Esther Flint found him some time later and helped him into the house, he wasn't feeling much better. "I'd better call the doctor," she said. "The skin's broken and you're still bleeding a bit."

"Fix it up the best you can," Ben told her.

"Who was it?"

"No one I knew. A tall cowhand on a dark horse." A memory came back to him. "Smelled of sheep-dip."

"The man or the horse?"

"Couldn't tell. Any sheep ranches around these parts?"

She thought about that. "No, but sometimes they unload sheep from South America at the docks in Port Arthur and ship them by rail to other parts of the state. Ranchers bring them in for cross-breeding. I suppose they'd have to dip them at the docks to kill vermin."

He propped himself up on one elbow. "I have a feeling this thing is bigger than I expected. I'd better go see Sheriff Renard in the morning."

The town hall was a busy place on the eve of election day. The first thing Ben noticed was that the door of the clerk's office was standing open. He went in and found the sheriff going through a desk near the window. "What do you want, Mr. Snow?"

"I've been trying to find someone here that I could ask about Margery Faraday."

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"She worked alone. I'm just checking out her desk, but there's nothing important here."

"Is it just a coincidence that the surveyor was killed too?"

"I thought I told you—he was killed for his boots." He straightened up from the desk and got a better look at Ben's head. "What happened to you? That's a pretty bad bruise."

"I ran into a rifle butt. Know anyone in town who works the docks over in Port Arthur? I hear it's close by."

He puzzled over the question, trying to decide whether he might be giving away important information. Finally he said, "Yancy Curtiss picks up some money there when the ships come in. Why'd you ask?"

"Where can I find him?"

"Look here, Mr. Snow—you know anything, you tell me. I'll ask the questions around here. It's my job."

"You've had two murders, and last night I was assaulted. I don't see you arresting anybody."

"I've got a suspect, a pretty strong one, at least for the Faraday killing."

"Who would that be?"

Sheriff Renard gave him a sly smile. "Your girlfriend, Esther Flint."

"That's crazy! Esther was Margery's best friend."

"That's her version. There are people around town who'd tell you she wanted Archie Johnson for herself. This shooting was nothing but a lovers' triangle."

"Esther was at the store with Archie at the time Margery Faraday was gunned down. She has a solid alibi."

"She told me that too. But take a look at the place where Margery was killed. It's the next block over from the general store and there's nothing but an empty lot in between. Esther Flint could have fired that rifle from a window and killed Margery without ever setting foot outside."

Ben Snow didn't believe it for a minute. He walked to the window and rested his hand on the frame, trying to appear casual. "You'll never prove that in any court of law. Tell me where I can find this Yancy Curtiss and maybe I'll have the killer for you."

"Oh, Yancy'll be around tomorrow night when they're counting the ballots. He's a big one for victory celebrations, especially if there's free beer."

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"Tell me one more thing. What areas was Jed Hawkins surveying just before he was killed?"

"Beats me. Margery used to send him out whenever property was sold. You'd have to go through her files for the most recent transfers."

"Could I do that?"

He shook his head. "It would take a court order, and you sure as hell aren't getting one."

Ben left the town hall and crossed the street to the little park. A few workmen were erecting a large scoreboard for the following day's election returns. He watched them for a few minutes, thinking about the sheriff's senseless allegations against Esther Flint. Ben couldn't believe she'd killed her best friend over love for Archie Johnson. And she certainly couldn't have killed the surveyor, Hawkins, because she'd been with Ben at Sid Bronte's rally.

Or was she?

He tried to remember the times. The rally had been scheduled for eight, and Bronte had started speaking about five minutes later. The broken watch in Jed Hawkins's pocket indicated he'd been killed at 8:17. Esther Flint had arrived late, just as Bronte was finishing his campaign speech around 8:40. Ben knew the broken watch could have been faked, but not by much. People had heard the shot and come running immediately.

He'd have to ask Esther why she was late that night.

It was after five when Ben arrived at the general store. Esther had taken off the white apron she wore while at work and was preparing to leave. Archie was waiting on a customer up front. "I'll take you to dinner if there's a decent place to eat," Ben suggested.

"The best place to eat tonight is at Mayor Whiting's barbecue. The whole town'll be there."

"Sounds good to me. But I thought you were a Bronte supporter."

She grinned at him. "I go where the food is best."

"You were late for Sid Bronte's speech on Saturday."

"Ran into a woman used to live here years ago. We got to talking about the old days."

"What's her name?"

"I don't even remember." She eyed him strangely. "Am I suspected of something?"

"Of course not."

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Mayor Whiting's final rally was at a big tent outside of town. It did seem that the entire population of five hundred must be there, and Ben even spotted Sid Bronte doing some rival campaigning of his own along the fringes of the crowd. When it came time for the speeches, Sheriff Renard was first, extolling the virtues of the mayor. Then Whiting himself got up and started speaking. Ben noticed Archie Johnson moving through the crowd up toward the speakers' platform.

"My opponent tells you tomorrow will be better!" Mayor Whiting bellowed. "I say today is already better! I say—"

"What about the two murders?" Archie Johnson yelled out. "What about Margery Faraday? Who killed her?"

"My good man—"

Johnson tried to interrupt again, but by that time the sheriff and a couple of others were on him, pulling him away. There were gasps from some of the nearest spectators when Sheriff Renard slugged Johnson with his gun butt and dragged him out of the tent.

"Please excuse the interruption," the mayor continued. "I can assure that man and everyone else that justice will be done. The killer or killers of our town clerk and our surveyor will be apprehended!"

Ben followed Esther out of the tent to the place where Archie's unconscious body had been dumped. She fell to her knees beside him, cradling his head in her hands. "Archie! Can you hear me?"

He stirred and opened his eyes. There was very little blood and the injury didn't seem as bad as it first appeared. "What—? Who slugged me?"

"The sheriff."

"Damn—! So much for free speech! I hope that loses some votes for Whiting."

"Just lie there for a moment and rest," she urged as he tried to sit up. "You'll be all right."

When he was able, they helped him back to town, stopping by Esther's house on the way to his place. "I have an idea about who might have killed them," Ben told him. "Do you know a man named Yancy Curtiss?"

"Seen him around. Don't know him well. He works on the docks sometimes, in Port Arthur."

"Why do you think he did it?" Esther asked.

"The attack on me was a warning to get out of town. He works like a hired gun, and I've known a lot of them."

"Why would someone want Margery killed?"

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"The sheriff has a lot of theories. He even suspects a lovers' triangle in which you killed her over Archie here."

"What! Are you serious?" Her mouth had dropped open, though Ben noticed that Archie said nothing.

"I don't buy that idea for a minute because it doesn't explain the killing of Jed Hawkins. Margery and Hawkins were linked by their jobs, and that's the key to this thing."

"In what way?"

"I think someone's buying up property. Jed Hawkins found something while he was surveying those recent land acquisitions, something that linked them together. His boots were stolen because the mud and dirt on them might have provided a clue. I could see some of it on his pants cuffs. His surveying equipment was taken too."

"No, it wasn't," Johnson told them. "I was talking to his sister. He'd been at her house for dinner Saturday night and left his instruments and notebook there."

"The notebook's what we need," Ben said.

Esther nodded. "We'll get it first thing in the morning."

There was an air of festivity in Seagull's Rest on election day. Ben went with Esther while she cast her ballot for Sid Bronte, chatting with the others in line as if it was a day for a picnic.

"You going to Mayor Whiting's big victory celebration tonight?" someone asked her.

"Let's see if he wins first."

It was the morning of Jed Hawkins's funeral, so they had to wait some time before they could see his sister. She would not let them take the things that had belonged to her brother, but Ben was able to copy down the last several lot numbers that he'd surveyed. "Now," he told Esther after they'd left, "we compare these numbers with the records in Margery's files at the town clerk's office and see if someone's been buying up a great deal of property that they want kept secret."

"How do we see the records in her office?"

"When I was there yesterday with the sheriff I managed to get over by the window and unlock the latch."

She simply stared at him. "Ben Snow, you could have been a criminal!"

"Maybe I am, for all you know."

They got back to her house in late afternoon, planning something to eat before setting out on the night's adventure. Esther unlocked

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the front door and stepped inside, with Ben right behind her.

He saw the closet door standing slightly ajar. Acting on instinct, he shoved her aside and drew his pistol, firing three quick shots through the wood of the door.

It swung slowly open and a man toppled bleeding to the floor. He was holding a short carbine in one hand and a pistol in the other. It was the man who'd slugged Ben on Sunday night.

"Yancy Curtiss!" Esther said from his side. "How did you know—?"

"Sheep-dip."

Yancy was unconscious but Sheriff Renard thought he'd probably live. "We'll see what he has to say when he comes to. Meantime, you'd better watch yourself, Snow. The longer you stay around the more likely it is you'll end up in one of my cells."

They waited till Yancy Curtiss had been taken off to the hospital and then Esther and Ben dressed in dark clothes and set off for the town hall. He'd forgotten that the big election scoreboard was set up in the square across the street. The polls had just closed and already the crowd was gathering to hear the results.

"We'll never get in there now," Esther decided.

"Yes, we will. There are bushes in front of the windows. They'll hide us from the crowd, who'll be busy with the election returns anyway."

The window was still unlatched. Hiding behind the bushes, he boosted Esther up to open it and then climbed in after her. As she started to close it he said, "Leave it open a crack so we can hear the returns."

"In the race for mayor," a voice bellowed through a megaphone, *"the first returns show it's neck and neck–143 for Mayor Whiting and 139 for Sid Bronte!"* Cheers went up from both sides.

Esther had brought along a blanket roll so they could cover the window and light a lamp. As Ben started going through the files he asked, "How many people vote here?"

"Over four hundred if it's a real contest. Just about everyone was going to vote today."

"Here's some land Sheriff Renard bought down by the Gulf. And Bronte."

"We need the parcels that Jed Hawkins surveyed," she reminded him.

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"I know." He began comparing the lot numbers with those on the list he'd made.

"Sid Bronte has taken a two-vote lead!"

"Here's one," Ben said.

"Now Mayor Whiting is back in the lead, 176 to 173."

"Here's another."

"The same buyer?"

"Yes."

"Anyone I know?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, for God's sake!"

"Whiting has pulled ahead, 195 to 187, but there's still one last ballot box to count. I think they're finishing it now!"

Ben wanted more proof before he spoke the name. He turned up a third card and a fourth. On the fifth he was satisfied. The recent land sales that Jed Hawkins had surveyed had all been purchased by the same person. A glance at the town map on the wall showed the lots were adjoining, all on the north side of town.

"And we have a winner! By a final vote of 210 to 201, the next mayor of Seagull's Rest is—"

"Who is it, Ben?"

"—Sid Bronte!"

"Sid Bronte."

Sheriff Renard was not easy to convince. He looked from Esther Flint to Ben Snow and said, for the third time, "But the man's just been elected mayor! You're telling me he hired Yancy Curtiss to kill those two people?"

"That's what I'm telling you," Ben said firmly. "I should have known it was Bronte even before I checked the clerk's records. He was giving a campaign speech Saturday night at the exact time Hawkins was killed. Esther and I were the first to reach him when he finished speaking, yet he told us there'd been another shooting. He knew it had happened because he arranged it. His mistake was in thinking it had happened earlier than it actually did. He betrayed himself with knowledge he shouldn't have had."

Renard merely shook his head. "What about the election?"

"His party will have to choose a replacement. I have a feeling that Yancy Curtiss will be more than willing to tell everything to escape a noose around his neck."

"But why? What was on this land to make it so valuable?"

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"I've a hunch it was oil, seeping up through the ground and muddying the boots of anyone who walked across those lots. Sid Bronte couldn't let it be known, just before the election, that he was buying up all the oil land in Seagull's Rest. He was willing to kill to keep that information a secret."

The sheriff laughed and shook his head. "*Oil?* You're telling me this was all over oil? That's the craziest thing I ever heard!"

Two months later, on January 10, 1901, Captain Anthony F. Lucas struck oil near Beaumont, only twenty miles away, and changed the face of Texas forever. But by that time Sid Bronte was in jail and Ben Snow was in New Orleans.

DETECTIVERSE

THE COUP

by STEVEN J. SWEENEY

It could have been worse: her bullet
Might have strayed from the path it was aimed.
Or the loud popping noise from the boardroom
Might have signaled the guard that a change
In the corporate structure was imminent,
That the CEO's cheating was done.
It could have been worse, but it wasn't:
Her beloved is out, and she's in.

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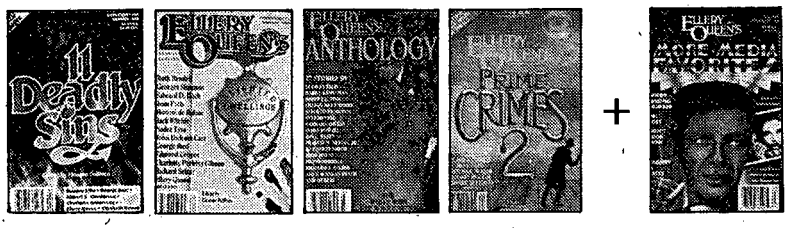

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Two *NEW* short shorts by

PHYLLIS DILLER

Phyllis Diller's fifth "sudden" fiction in EQMM *(the first was in the June 1990 issue)—and a delicious star turn it is . . .*

TAKEOUT DINNER

It took her three weeks to get all the ingredients for the meatloaf together. Of course, she didn't measure the time by the day. Her gauge was the number of arguments she had with her husband. Thus, a week could be six spats, two scream-outs, and one or two lulus. In a good week, three scream-outs weren't out of reach. The monster brawl that had started eight years before, the year after they were married, still smoldered. No children for Gregory, and that was that!

These most recent arguments all stemmed from Idabel's desire to stop working. She wasn't lazy. She'd never been lazy. She was merely tired, what with her job at the book bindery from Monday to Friday and helping Gregory in the carpet store on weekends. If she quit the book bindery, that second family income would be gone. Idabel wasn't familiar with what came in and what came out. She suspected that she and Gregory lived on her income. It was possible some of her earnings were actually maintaining the carpet store. She didn't know enough about bookkeeping to tell. She knew only that she deserved a rest. She had no right to be so fatigued. She was only thirty-six years old. Not an ounce of fat. So why was she so tired? Well, not tired in the usual sense. Worn out was more like it.

The fact was that she needed a long vacation. She was even willing to go on a trip with Gregory, even though for two weeks in Italy three years before she'd had to put up with his incessant carping about prices and the lack of modern facilities. She could still hear him complaining about a ten-minute wait for a table at that nice

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restaurant on the Piazza Navona in Rome. "When I'm hungry I want to eat! I don't want to wait in line!"

She'd said, "Try lowering your voice. These other people don't have to know you're an idiot."

"An idiot? I'll concede that—yes, sir. I'm an idiot because I spent three grand on this trip! My business is going down the drain and I'm standing like an idiot on a smelly Roman street!"

She could have told him that he was going down the drain personally, too. He couldn't walk a block without beginning to gasp for air. Idabel, in fact, had consoled herself for a while with the hope that Gregory might have a heart attack. Huffing and puffing, his face would become sallow, but no heart attack paid him a call.

When the meatloaf was ready for baking, Idabel shook her head. It was amazing how an explosive could be made to look like an uncooked meatloaf. The yellow-brown chemical starter she'd spread on the crown of the meatloaf managed to look like some exotic mustard, one of those strong German mustards. Only, she told herself, German mustards might *look* fierce, but they weren't lethal. The chemical starter would be delightfully lethal when the oven was turned on. The heat would cause it to bubble and produce an acid that would ignite the explosive.

The explosive was in the TNT family. The irony was that she had learned about it from Gregory. He'd built up a hatred toward their private gopher who, having dug a dozen burrows under the front lawn, now threatened the mailbox stand. The stand had already started to tilt. "I don't have time to fool around with the critter," Gregory had said. "Make yourself useful. Handle it."

Idabel was handling it.

After Idabel put the meatloaf pan on the kitchen counter, she thanked Gregory in absentia for telling her that the garden shop on Grand Avenue handled products that would destroy gophers and sat down to write a brief note. "Gregory honey, I don't want to fight any more. It hurts me. Let's start over, beginning with tonight. I know how much you love meatloaf. All you have to do is heat the oven to 375 degrees. I'll do the rest when I get home. I'd do it all but I'm working overtime today. Another forty dollars that'll come in handy." She signed the note with a loving flourish and tucked the piece of paper under the meatloaf pan.

Ten minutes later, Idabel was at the counter of the diner on Chapman Street. Sipping her coffee, she was studying the classified ads in the morning paper. There were three columns of apartment rentals.

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HANDY MEN

by PHYLLIS DILLER

Mrs. Margaret Felbro loved her new house on Evander Street. From the moment she and Andrew moved in, she spent almost all her waking hours tidying and prettying up the four small rooms. A set of curtains put up, a cabinet painted, she stood back and inhaled all the love the house offered.

One morning in April, Andrew, who spent his time at home watching television or playing computer games in the tiny den, came home from an office party in less than full control of himself. Jumping over the white picket fence his wife had painted, he started across the lawn and, seeing a sprinkler head which had fallen off, he leaned over to rescrew it. The head on firmly, he started for the steps to the house and tripped on a rainbird. His head cracked against the cement walk. He was dead before the paramedics arrived. Mrs. Felbro received a check for one hundred thousand dollars from Mr. Joseph Novatny, the representative of the life-insurance company.

The following year, Mrs. Felbro became Mrs. Walter Horn. The Horns moved to a large house in which Margaret could display her affection for Early American. But what promised to be a long and happy union was dissolved shortly thereafter when, repairing a broken window in the attic, Walter accidentally stuck his hand through a jagged pane of glass. A shard tore the large arteries and veins of his left wrist. Before assistance could be summoned, his blood and his life, both rich, had seeped out. Mr. Novatny appeared at the house four days after the funeral and presented a check for three hundred thousand dollars to the forlorn widow.

It was two years before Mrs. Horn tested the matrimonial waters again. On a bright autumn morning, looking radiant in a pink dress and flowered hat, at a small church at the edge of town, she became Mrs. Craig Tesling. Craig was a good catch, a man of standing in the community, and steady, if perhaps a tad tight. Proud of his mechanical ability, he attempted, at no damage to the weekly family

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budget, to replace a thermostat for the gas heater. A slight fissure resulted in a gas leak. The leakage soon filled the new Tesling abode, the windows being closed, and, equally soon, Craig's lungs. Soon afterward, Mr. Novatny appeared for a third time. Mrs. Tesling sighed and accepted a check for seven hundred thousand dollars.

The tides went in and out, out and in. Time strode relentlessly through the path of the living. When the Easter season beamed down its warmth, Mrs. Margaret Tesling became Mrs. Joseph Novatny and the mistress of an even larger home. Because he was an employee of the insurance company, Joseph was allowed, without even a physical, to take out a policy the face value of which was one million dollars.

Shortly thereafter, the city was rocked by an epic scandal. A new bride, a Mrs. Joseph Novatny, had murdered her husband, striking him on the head several times with a rather large hammer. It seemed that they had quarreled because he had refused to hammer in a nail on a dining room wall so that a picture could be hung.

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a *NEW* short story by

BLANCHE BOSHINSKI

"I'm disposing of Miss Cjeka's assets exactly as she directed," Mr. Dorvic said. "It may all seem a bit strange, but I'm not aware of her relationships with you."

He looked at each of them. He chewed his lower lip, then asked, "Did Minta—Miss Cjeka—like to play games . . . ?"

GAMES

by BLANCHE BOSHINSKI

Aunt Minta is dead. At first the news is a relief. Then a hope. Mr. Dorvic, Aunt Minta's lawyer, has called to say she left me something. I'm to meet him at her old house at 10 A.M. Saturday.

I haven't seen my dead father's sister since she left Scraggburg ten years ago. Every day of those years I've woken with a knot in my stomach.

"Maybe she knows," I think. "Maybe today she will tell."

But now Aunt Minta is dead. She never found out what happened to her fiancé, Mike Jordan.

"CoraLee, don't you expect much," Mom says.

Mom has trudged up the stairs to watch me dress for the meeting with the lawyer. She stands in the doorway of my bedroom. Her faded nightgown drags below Dad's ragged green terry-cloth robe that she started wearing when he died. That was almost twenty-five years ago, when I was four.

Mom's uncombed hair hangs around her gaunt face. She's like our town since the coal companies abandoned it years ago—ill kept and hopeless.

When I don't answer, Mom repeats herself. "Don't expect much."

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"After being raised and stuck in this dump of a town who would expect much from anything?" I ask her.

Mom and I gave up being sociable long ago. I haven't even told her about Jim and me. After the wedding, I'll say, "Jim and I are married. Good-bye." And I'll walk out.

Mom doesn't want to think her sister-in-law has made any money, but someone saw Minta in Philadelphia a couple of years ago and said she had done well by making good investments with what Grandpa left her.

I was scared when this news about my aunt started circulating between Lara's beauty parlor and Nick's Cafe and then back up the other side of the street. The questions were the same as when Mike left town and didn't come back.

Did Minta leave because of that man from California?

Mike Jordan, wasn't it? Good looking fella.

Just leaving for a couple of weeks to take care of business, he said.

What happened to him?

This was the question I didn't want probed.

But now Aunt Minta is dead. Talk or nothing else will bother her or, more importantly, me.

I dress in my brown gabardine slacks and a tan sweater for the walk to Minta's house on the other side of our narrow valley. I comb my long hair back so it falls loosely on my shoulders. My wages at the discount store don't allow for fancy clothes, but I try to look neat. Even so, people don't seem to like me much. But on the whole there aren't many people in Scraggburg that I like either.

I go down the steps, through the living room with its matted shag carpet and heavy dark furniture that I hate, and out the front door.

I walk on up Scragg Hill. In the next block Mabel Schroeder is sitting on the porch steps with her bare and swollen feet stuck out on the walk while she waits for the farmer to come by with his vegetable truck.

"Sorry about Minta," Mabel says. "Guess you haven't been up to the house for a spell, have you?"

"It's been awhile," I answer as I keep walking.

Folks say Mabel doesn't remember much any more. I wish she didn't remember me.

"I remember how you and your cousins used to come running down this hill at suppertime on your way home." Mabel keeps talking as

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I go by. "She looked after you summers and when school got out while your mothers worked, didn't she?"

"That's right," I say over my shoulder.

In a couple of uphill blocks I come to where the sidewalk ends and the paths into the woods begin. One cuts over to Coal Township where Minta used to live.

The dew on the shaded brush along the path soaks my slacks from mid-calf down. I'm disgusted with myself. I should have gone through town instead of the woods. I guess I wanted to make myself face what happened up here one more time now that my aunt is dead.

I come to a piece of cleared land that juts out from the hillside and overlooks the town. Old Jake Martin has stopped here on his morning walk with his equally ancient and bedraggled chow.

"The town looks picturesque from here," he says to me.

"But we know better, don't we?" I reply.

In reality, instead of tree-lined streets in a postcard village set among the hills, ill will and decay thrive there. The windows are boarded up at the clothing factory and obscene graffiti is sprayed on the brick walls. The depot's north side has crumbled, and an entire block of stores on Main Street stand vacant with broken windows.

"Looks like the new library is almost finished," Jake says. "Sure good to see the town moving ahead."

Old fool, I think.

The chow pulls at his leash and Jake begins to move on.

"Can't let him run loose with all the old coal holes up here," he says. "Never know where one might be that isn't filled in or covered."

Jake's right about the holes. Anyone who doesn't know to watch out can drop down several mine levels through the airshafts.

I look out to the other side of town where the shopping center opened three years ago. I can barely make out Jim Corman's drugstore behind a line of small green trees. Jim needs another wife now that Marge has finally left him for good. She waited on customers and worked the cash register, and I know he expects me to do the same. A lot of women he might want to marry wouldn't be willing to do that. But once I'm his wife I'll live in that nice house of his and the other wives will have to accept me. No one can keep me from belonging to the businessmen's wives' luncheon club or going to dinners at the swanky Country Estates.

I resume my walk. Mabel Schroeder has made me think about those days at Minta's big house. Our aunt told George and Evie and

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me which rooms, upstairs and down, were out-of-bounds. But we snooped in every nook, closet and drawer.

In my mind I can hear our whispers and quiet giggles.

"Here, Evie, try on this pearl necklace."

"Look at me in this dress, George. Can you reach that shawl for me?"

And George always saying, "Look for letters and stuff that we can use for *blackmail*. We'll make Aunt Minta give us money for the movies."

We switched the cinnamon and pepper in their shakers and shooed Aunt Minta's parakeet outside so we could laugh as she tried to catch it.

I come to the end of the path and see the house, the last one on the street at the top of the hill. The white paint has flaked away and left grey weathered boards roofed with shingles that are black from the grime that sifts down from the piles of smouldering coal slag, still alive deep below the surface.

One of the porch steps is broken. The lace curtains at the upstairs windows hang in tatters. Two cars sit out in front, a new foreign sports model and a big green clunker with a broken window.

I stop before crossing the street. I want to think how it was that summer day with Aunt Minta standing on the porch yelling at Marty Bonelli and me. When I think about that, I never feel guilty about Mike Jordan.

I remember so clearly how my aunt's dark hair was gathered in a pony tail with a red scarf. She was wearing a blue flowered skirt and grey knit shirt.

"You, Bonelli," she yelled. "You get gone and don't ever come back. CoraLee, if I see you with that trash again, I'll lock you inside. I'll not be responsible for you when you have friends like him."

I knew Marty had been in trouble. Mr. O'Connor accused him of robbing his bakery but couldn't prove it. Girls at school would giggle and whisper about Marty on Monday mornings, but Marty liked me that summer. No boy had ever paid attention to me before. I knew I was in love.

I can still see the smirk on Marty's face and the hand sign he gave Aunt Minta. He didn't look at me, just turned and left. Marty never spoke to me again. A few days later Lynn and Joyce were giggling about him in the check-out line at the A & P.

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And now, when I'm 29, I still know I was in love because I've never felt that way about anyone since.

I go up the five steps to the porch where we used to sit and play hearts on days when it was too hot to run in the woods. The front door is open, so I walk in.

The wide living room surprises me, because it is just the same as always except for a layer of dust on the mantel and the piano lid covering the keys. The huge lumpy sofa and chair still take up most of the north wall. The rolltop desk is straight ahead.

Mr. Dorvic is standing by the desk sorting through a handful of papers. When I come in he deliberately stares at the watch on his hairy wrist. His scruffy red beard has greyed since I saw him up close a couple of years ago.

A blond woman sitting on a straight chair turns as I come in. She pulls her cheap dress down over her thighs as she jumps up.

"CoraLee, how are you? I've been a nervous wreck waiting for you and thinking about Aunt Minta and all."

In spite of myself, I let out a happy cry and reach out to my cousin.

"Evie, I don't know why I'm surprised," I say. "All the way from where?"

"Oklahoma, south of Norman," Evie says and then bursts out, "Do you think she left us much?"

"Let's hope so," I say. Evie has turned out sort of pretty, I have to admit. She always had that thick, wavy blond hair. She told me at her wedding that Sid married her for her hair.

"Miss Cjeka, we've been waiting," Mr. Dorvic says.

But before I can settle myself beside Evie a voice comes from the winged chair near the fireplace. "Hello, Corky."

"George!"

My older cousin stays slouched in the chair as I reach out and take his offered hand. He's wearing a worn T-shirt with a peace sign on the front and faded blue sweat pants.

"We three back here together," I say as I turn to include Evie in my exclamation. "Nothing's changed," I add, indicating the room with a sweep of my hand.

"We had fun here, didn't we?" Evie says. From her tone I know she wants confirmation. It wasn't always fun for her. "Why do you want to hurt Aunt Minta?" Evie would ask as she crouched in a corner and cried as George and I plotted our next attack.

I don't know why. Something to do, I guess. Putting some excitement into our lives.

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"And what secrets, eh, Corky?" George adds.

"Of course," I say lightly. "Children always have secrets from adults."

George is picking at a hangnail on his thumb. I see he still chews his nails. I'm sure he doesn't know the biggest secret of all. How could he? It was so cold that night and with everyone bundled up and hurrying, he wouldn't have noticed even if he had been looking out the window of the barbershop when Mike and I went by.

"Please," the lawyer says.

Evie obeys and sits back down on the chair. Her hands twist the frayed handle of her plastic purse around and around.

She smiles when I pull the wooden rocker up beside her, but she's anxious. Desperate, more likely, from the looks of her. Three kids and a husband who doesn't know how to make a good living, so Mom has heard, anyway. Just the same, my first impulse of joy at seeing her is gone. I don't want to share Aunt Minta's wealth, however much or little it is.

Mr. Dorvic shuffles his papers once more and then says, "Minta Cjeka was a woman of—" He hesitates and searches for the right words. He begins again. "Your aunt had a few strange ideas about—Just how would you describe her?"

We don't help him. It's an old habit. Aunt Minta would demand we tell her where we had hidden something, why we had behaved as we did. We, in turn, would become stonefaced, even Evie, when told to speak up and tell. I decide Mr. Dorvic is too mousy to fit my idea of a lawyer.

George looks at me and winks. We could generally tell what the other one was thinking.

Finally, Mr. Dorvic gets started. "Miss Cjeka asked me to come see her a couple of months ago." He starts going over her past, date of birth, accomplishments. It becomes a eulogy.

My mind wanders. George was her favorite, in spite of his orneriness. "No, CoraLee," Aunt Minta would say, "George gets the big piece of pie. He's the oldest."

But then, after George left Scraggburg, we heard he needed money. Embezzlement? And Minta wouldn't loan him anything to clean up the mess.

Mr. Dorvic clears his throat and brings me back to the present.

"I'm disposing of Miss Cjeka's assets exactly as she directed," he says. "It may all seem a bit strange, but I'm not aware of her relationships with you."

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He looks at each of us. He chews his lower lip, then asks, "Did Minta—Miss Cjeka—like to play games?"

We three cousins glance at each other. Aunt Minta didn't but we loved to play games, only she called them dirty tricks. Like the time George found her checkbook and tore out three checks and I changed the dollar amounts in her accounting.

"Let's skip all this and get down to business," George says.

"Yes, of course, the will," the lawyer says, "or really the instructions or—the game. Yes, it's really like a game."

I wonder what he means. A will is a will.

"Each of you," he says, as I literally hold my breath, "is to receive $80,000 credit."

I'm not certain I hear right. My heart makes a leap and begins to pound in my throat. Evie makes a gurgling sound and clutches her purse to her chest.

"Credit?" George asks. "What does that mean?"

The lawyer shuffles his papers and his face gets red. He doesn't like this game, as he calls it.

"I have put a price on most items in the house," he explains as he hands us two sheets of paper stapled together. "You are to purchase whatever you want in the house with your credit."

"Why should I want any of this junk?" George wants to know as he jumps from his chair and shakes the list in Mr. Dorvic's face.

"Isn't there any money?" Evie asks quietly. "Just money."

Mr. Dorvic hesitates. "You were not to know this until after picking your items," he finally says, "but you are to keep what you don't spend."

I feel weak. My heart won't quit pounding. I can't even think what $80,000 will buy!

"If that's the case, I'll take the money now and get out of here," George says.

"I insist that you look around," Mr. Dorvic says. "Your aunt thought the sight of familiar items would bring back memories. She wanted that—like a memorial service."

"Up in the bedroom there was a picture of a rose garden," Evie murmurs and moves off toward the stairs.

I see she has a big run up the back of her nylons.

George stands in the middle of the room frowning at the list, then heads for the downstairs bedrooms.

I'm not sure my legs will move and still hold me up. I'm trembly all over.

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"What about the house itself?" I ask. My cousins stop at the opposite ends of the room and turn to hear the answer.

"It's to go for half its value if you want it," the lawyer tells us.

He looks at his watch again. "I have a meeting in an hour. I hope thirty minutes will be enough time."

It's a ritual. We all know that the money is the only thing that matters.

I go through the dining room. I used to think I'd want the china angel on the top shelf of the cabinet or the silk shawl with the tassels that is still draped over the buffet, but that was when I was small and romantic. I look out the dirty double window to the wooded hillside. In the fall the view is crimson and gold. I see the peach tree has grown and a few blossoms have burst open.

In the kitchen the counter top is cracked and crusts of dirt line the sink. The back porch has been enclosed in glass. Old papers are stacked in the corner and a dog's food pan is upside down by the door. At one time there must have been renters.

I look out to the garden area. Aunt Minta always let me plant the first row of lettuce and radishes in the spring. She said I had the green thumb of the family. But I don't want to remember the good things—not the plastic swimming pool, the homemade ice cream, the tire swing on the biggest limb of the oak tree at the edge of the woods.

I stare beyond the oak. This is the last time I'm going to think about that night. I'll go through it now, and that's the end of the memory. Gone. Buried with Aunt Minta.

I had gone down the hill to the corner store to pick up cough syrup for Mom and had just started home. An icy wind cut through my jacket and the few people who were out had their heads down and their collars turned up. I heard someone call. Mike Jordan was coming up the street from the highway with a small pack on his back. I waited for him to catch up to me.

"Hi, Corky," he said. "I had a chance to hitch a ride so I came back a couple of days early. I want to surprise Minta."

I didn't know Mike very well. I seldom went to Aunt Minta's any more. Evie still did, though, and I went to play with her sometimes. George might be there, too, raking, pruning, or other jobs she hired him to do.

That night he talked like we were old friends as he walked beside me up Scragg Hill instead of cutting through town to Coal Township. We passed the barbershop where George hung out in the evening

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with friends, but I didn't look close to see if he was there.

At my house, Mike said, "It's so dark, I'm not sure I can find the right path to Minta's."

I just wanted to go inside and get warm, but I agreed to go that far. Mabel Schroeder was letting her cat in as we went by.

"Keep angling on the paths to the left," I told Mike when we reached the woods.

"Can you keep a secret?" Mike asked me. "I want Minta to be the one to tell everyone, of course."

He took a velvet ring box from his pocket and opened it. The streetlight at the top of the hill gave just enough light to show me the beautifully faceted gem. In it I saw all the fantasies of my love for Marty.

I grabbed the box and ran into the woods.

"CoraLee, stop. Come back here," Mike yelled. "CoraLee!"

"CoraLee," George calls from the living room. "Get in here and let's get this over with."

I think of the diamond hidden in my bottom drawer and of the plain gold band that Jim has picked out for our wedding. I don't want to marry Jim Corman. I hate him. I can't stand the feel of his pudgy fingers on my skin. But I don't have to marry him now. I have money! I can leave Scraggburg. I'm free.

"I'll take this," Evie is saying when I go back to the living room. She's holding a rag doll that used to be on a shelf over Minta's bed. "It was in the closet, but I can't find it on the list."

"Five dollars for unlisted items," Mr. Dorvic says.

Evie giggles. "I guess I can spare that much."

"If you have picked all the things you want to buy, then we'll go on to the final part of the game," the lawyer says. He takes three envelopes from his briefcase. "As you can see," he continues, "each envelope has one of your names printed on it."

"So what's in them?" George wants to know.

"Your aunt told me that there's a copy of a letter in each. The original will be sent to the person named in my instructions, that is, if you don't wish to purchase the letter."

His words come out as if he has a big chunk of dry bread in his throat. I know how he feels. I think I'm being strangled.

"What kind of letter?" Evie asks in a whisper.

"I have no idea," Mr. Dorvic says. "Miss Cjeka seemed to think you would know."

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"How much for the letter?" George asks.

"Whatever is left after you have picked your memorabilia."

George laughs and claps his hands. "Well, the old girl turned the tables on us."

Evie and I look at each other. I think she's going to faint, and I help her sit down and grab the back of the chair to support myself.

"Give me my money," George says. "What could she tell anyone about me that would matter? I've spent six years in the pen for embezzlement just because she wouldn't loan me a little money."

I'm listening to all of this through a fog. It's as if I'm in another world and eavesdropping on a crazy comedy of errors. My feet and hands are cold.

"The letter must be to Sid," Evie is saying to me. She looks scared.

"Will it matter?"

Evie doesn't answer me but turns to the lawyer and says, "I'll take the money."

The lawyer writes out two checks. Evie sticks it into her purse without a glance. She's looking at the envelope on the desk.

"Has it been mailed yet?"

"No, of course not. I didn't know what you would decide."

"I have to catch the bus back this afternoon. Will you wait three days?" she asks.

Mr. Dorvic nods.

"Put it in the bank, write a check, and fly home, Evie," George says.

Evie looks at him without comprehension. The idea of having money hasn't caught up with her yet. She gives me a quick hug and says, "If you buy the house, I hope you'll be happy here, CoraLee."

"But I don't—" I begin, but my cousin is gone. Her runover heel catches on a rough porch board, and she almost falls before grabbing the railing.

George puts his check in his pocket and stretches like a lazy cat. "Do you suppose a bottle of that vodka she kept under the pantry shelf is still there?" He grins at me. "Remember that afternoon," he begins, then decides to forget it.

Mr. Dorvic and I don't speak until after we hear the door of the old car thud shut, the motor grind and catch, and finally, the clatter fade out down the hill.

"And now you, Miss Cjeka. I guess you want your letter."

I feel my face grow red. For all time now, whenever I see this man we'll look at each other and he will know I have a secret worth $80,000.

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He gathers up his papers. "Your choices turned out just as Minta thought they would," he says. "She had already taken six years of George's life and he'd paid his debt. And Evie was never an instigator. Minta doubted your younger cousin had anything at all to hide."

"I suppose you know what's in my letter, too."

He shakes his head. "She was certain you wouldn't let it be mailed. Whatever the secret is, I guess she knew it." He holds out the envelope.

I grab it and run from the house. I don't look back, because up on the hill I might see Mike Jordon rising up from the shaft just as he does in my nightmares. That night, even in the dark, I knew every pit in the mountain. I only had to step into a shadow at the right moment and let Mike Jordan take that last running leap.

I can't get my breath. Behind me I hear Mr. Dorvic's car leave. I lean against a tree. My hands shake as I rip open the envelope and take out a sheet of paper. It's a final message from Aunt Minta: "I win."

ON OUR COVER

Charles Keating is familiar to London theatre audiences as Ridgeon in *The Doctor's Dilemma* and the Common Man in *A Man for All Seasons*. A past member of the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Chichester Festival Theatre, the Tyrone Guthrie Theatre, and other companies on both sides of the Atlantic, he now resides in Connecticut. In New York he has appeared in Orton revivals: *Loot* on Broadway and *What the Butler Saw* at the Manhattan Theatre Club. He also starred in *Dinner at Eight* at Long Wharf, and *Wife Begins at Forty* and *Rough Crossing* at the Westport Country Playhouse.

Mr. Keating has appeared on television as Rex in "Brideshead Revisited," Mr. Simpson in "Edward and Mrs. Simpson," episodes of "Sgt. Cribb," "Tales of the Unexpected," "The Equalizer," "Miami Vice," and the BBC's Shakespeare series. We have also seen him as an American soap star on such popular programs as "Another World" and "All My Children." He has had roles in such films as *The Rocking Horse Winner* and *Awakenings* with Robin Williams and Robert DeNiro.

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ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Here lies a butcher, Caesar Cook,
A very minor, small-time crook.
His shop was patronized so well
By a fairly prosperous clientele
That Caesar thought it was no big deal
To overcharge just a bit for veal
And beef and pork and lamb and liver—
His buyers would pay without a quiver.
So when he weighed the meat he'd sell,
He often weighed his thumb as well,
Resting it on the scale's back rim
Until the meat's weight suited him.
He thus took in, whenever he could,
A few more bucks than he honestly should.
But then his wife, Lucille, one day
Discovered the trick that he liked to play,
And was so shocked by his crooked weighing
That she read him a heated lecture, saying,
"Why, you're a thief! A dirty thief!
My husband, Caesar! Beyond belief!
If you keep cheating your customer friends
You'll end where a common criminal ends!
You'll land in jail, my larcenous kiddo,
And leave poor me just a prison widow!
Stop being so hot for easy money!
Stop being so hot for a profit, honey!
I beg you, Caesar, don't be a fool!
Stop being so hot and just stay cool!"
And Caesar, who adored Lucille
Much more than he valued pork or veal,
Instantly tried to calm and please her:
He locked himself in his walk-in freezer
And, drawing breath after frigid breath,
He stayed so cool that he froze to death.

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a Horace Rumpole story by

JOHN MORTIMER

"Well," Mizz Liz Probert said, "you've really deserted us for the enemy now, haven't you, Rumpole."

"I haven't been listening to the news." I tried to be gentle with her. "Are we at war?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I mean. Henry's told me all about it. In my opinion it's as contemptible as acting for a landlord who's trying to evict a one-parent family on supplementary benefit. You've gone over to the Prosecution."

"Not gone over"—I did my best to reassure the inflamed daughter of Red Ron Probert, once the firebrand leader of the South-East London Labour Council—"just there on a visit."

But Rumpole's sojourn results in a most unusual prosecution. Like his creator John Mortimer, a barrister since 1948, it is Rumpole's nature to defend . . .

RUMPOLE FOR THE PROSECUTION

by JOHN MORTIMER

As anyone who has cast half an eye over these memoirs will know, the second of the Rumpole commandments consists of the simple injunction "Thou shalt not prosecute." Number one is "Thou shalt not plead guilty." Down the line, of course, there are other valuable precepts such as "Never pay for the drink Jack Pommeroy is prepared to put on the slate," "Never trust a vegetarian," "If Sam Ballard thinks it, then it must be wrong," "Never go shopping with She Who Must Be Obeyed," "Don't ask a question unless

From Rumpole à la Carte *by John Mortimer. Copyright © Advanpress Ltd., 1990. Excerpted by arrangement with Viking Penguin, a division of Penguin Books USA, Inc.*

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you're damn sure you know the answer," "If a judge makes a particularly absurd remark, rub his nose in it, i.e., repeat it to the Jury with raised eyebrows every hour on the hour," and "Never ask an instructing solicitor if his leg's better." This last is as fatal as asking a client if he happens to be guilty; you run a terrible danger of being told.

But the rule against prosecuting has been the lodestar of my legal career. I obey this precept for a number of reasons, all cogent. It seems to me that errant and misguided humanity has enough on its plate without running the daily risk of being driven, cajoled, or hoodwinked into the nick by Rumpole in full flood, armed with an unparalleled knowledge of bloodstains and a remarkable talent for getting a jury to see things his way. As everyone—except a nun in a Trappist order and the Home Secretary—now knows, the prison system is bursting at the seams and it would be out of the question for even more captives to arrive at the gates thanks to my forensic skills.

Then again, prosecuting counsel tend to be fawned on by Mr. Justice Graves and his like, characters whom I prefer to keep in a state of healthy hostility. Finally, I should point out that it is the task of prosecuting counsel to present the facts in a neutral manner and not try to score a victory. This duty (not always carried out, I may say, by those who habitually persecute down the Old Bailey) takes the fun out of the art of advocacy. There are many adjectives which might be used to describe Rumpole at work but "neutral" is not among them. It is a sad but inescapable fact that as soon as I buckle on the wig and gown and march forth to war in the courtroom, the old adrenalin courses through my veins and all I want to do is win.

Bearing all this in mind, you may find it hard to understand how, in the case that came to be known as the "Mews Murder," I took the brief in a private prosecution brought by the dead girl's father.

"All right, Mr. Rumpole. You're out to protect the underdog, I understand that. I might say that I find it very sympathetic. You attack the establishment. Tease the judges. Give the police a hard time. Well, doesn't my daughter deserve defending as much as any of your clients?"

I looked down at the pile of press-cuttings on my desk and at the photograph of Veronica Fabian. She was a big, rather plain girl in her early twenties. I imagined that she had a loud laugh and an

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untidy bedroom. There was also, in spite of her smile, a look of disappointment and a lack of confidence about her, and I thought she might have been a girl who often fell unhappily in love. Whatever she had been like, she had died, beaten to death in an empty mews house in Notting Hill Gate. I didn't altogether understand what I could do in her defence, or how such an earthbound tribunal as a judge and jury down the Old Bailey could now pass judgment on her.

"You want me to defend your daughter?"

"Yes, Mr. Rumpole. That's exactly what I want."

Gregory Fabian, senior partner in the firm of Fabian & Winchelsea, purveyors of discreet homes to the rich and famous, dealers in stately homes and ambassadorial dwellings, had aged, I imagined, since the death of his daughter. There is something squalid about murder which brings a sense of shame to the victim's as well as the killer's family. In spite of this, Fabian spoke moderately and without rancour. He was a slim man, in his early sixties, short but handsome, clear-featured, with creases at the sides of his eyes and the general appearance of someone who laughed a good deal in happier times.

"Isn't it a little late for that? To defend her, I mean?"

"There's no time limit on murder, is there?" He smiled at me gently as he said this, and I was prepared to accept that his interest went beyond mere revenge.

"Justice! We haven't had much of that, sir. Not since they decided not to charge Jago. We just wanted to know how much that cost him. Whatever it was, he could probably afford it." Up spoke young Roger Fabian, the dead girl's brother and the one who, being very close in appearance to his father, seemed to have inherited all the good looks in the family and left little for his sister. He looked what he probably had been, the most popular boy in whatever uncomfortable and expensive public school he had attended; but he bore his good fortune modestly, and even managed to slander the fair name of the serious crimes squad with a certain inoffensive charm. His habit of calling me "sir" made me feel uncomfortably respectable. I wondered if all prosecuting counsel get called "sir" at conferences.

"Why did the police let him go? That's what we want you to find out."

"You were recommended to us as a barrister who didn't mind having a go at a man like Detective Chief Inspector Brush."

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Brush? The very copper who, in his salad days, had been the hammer of the Timsons and my constant sparring partner down the Bailey, now promoted to giddy heights in charge of a West London area, where he had brilliantly failed to solve the "Mews Murder" and let Christopher Jago, the number one suspect, out of his clutches.

"They say you'll never be a judge, so you're not afraid of going for the police, Mr. Rumpole." Fabian senior managed to make it sound like a compliment.

"They said we weren't to mind about the soup on the tie or the cigar ash down the waistcoat." Fabian junior was even more complimentary. "And you don't care a toss for the establishment."

"They said you'd do this job far better than the usual sort of polite and servile Q.C." And when I asked George Fabian who they were, who spoke so highly of Rumpole, and he gave the name of Pyecraft & Wensleydale, our instructing solicitor and one of the poshest firms in the city, I could hardly forbear to preen myself visibly.

In answer to repeated inquiries from Pyecraft, Detective Chief Inspector Brush and his men had disclosed the gist of Christopher Jago's statement to them. He said he was a local estate agent, who had seen the For Sale notices outside 13A Gissing Mews, off Westbourne Grove, and wanted to view the property for a client of his own. He had rung Fabian & Winchelsea and been put through to a young lady, believed to have been Veronica Fabian, who worked with her brother and father in the family business. He made an appointment to meet her at the house in question at 8:30 the following morning. The time was set by Jago, who was leaving that day to do a deal in some time-share apartments on the Costa del Sol. When Jago got to 13A Gissing Mews, the front door was open. He went in, expecting to meet Miss Fabian, whom he told the police he had never met before. The little mews house was still half-furnished and decorated, apparently, with African rugs and carvings. There were some spears fixed to the wall of the hallway, and a weighted knobkerrie, a three-foot black club, had been torn down and caused the fatal blow to the girl. Jago said he had knelt beside her body and tried to raise her head, during which operation his cuff had become smeared with blood.

Then there followed the events which might have made any family feel that they had good reason to suspect Christopher Jago. He said he panicked. There he was with a dead girl whose blood was on his clothing and he felt sure he would be accused of some sort of sex killing—one of the murders which had recently terrified the

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neighborhood. He left the house, drove to the airport, and went on his way to Spain. Two hours later, the owner of the mews called to collect some of his possessions, found the body, and called the police. Veronica Fabian had died from extensive wounds to her skull. The only real clue was the name she had written against her eight-thirty appointment in her desk diary: Arthur Morrison. The police spent a great deal of time trying to find or identify the man Morrison but without success.

As luck would have it, Jago had parked his car on a resident's parking place in the mews, and the irate resident had taken its number. When he got back to England, Jago was questioned as a possible witness. He immediately admitted that he had found the dead girl, panicked, and run away. However, after several days when he was assisting the police with their inquiries (often a euphemism for getting himself stitched up) Jago was released, to the surprise and fury of the surviving members of the Fabian family.

"You'd've charged him at least, Mr. Rumpole, wouldn't you?" Fabian *père* sounded, as ever, reasonable.

"Perhaps. But I've grown up with the awkward habit of believing everyone innocent until they're proved guilty."

"But you'll take it on for us, won't you? At least let a jury decide?"

"I'll have to think about it." I lit a small cigar and blew out smoke. If Fabian *fils* had come expecting ash down the waistcoat I might as well let him have it. It's a curious English system, in my view, which allows private citizens to prosecute each other for crimes with the aim of sending each other to chokey, and I wasn't at all sure that it ought to be encouraged. I mean, where would it end? I might be tempted to draft an indictment against Sam Ballard, the Head of our Chambers, on the grounds of public nuisance. I had caught this soapy customer ostentatiously pinning up NO SMOKING notices in the passage outside my door.

"But we've got to have justice, Mr. Rumpole. Isn't that the point?"

"Have we? 'Use every man after his desert,' as a well-known Dane put it, 'and who should escape whipping?' " I puffed out another small cigar cloud, hoping it would eventually waft its way in the general direction of our Head of Chambers, who would, no doubt, go off like a fire alarm. I was thinking of the difficulty of having a client I could never meet in this world, whom I could never ask what happened when she went to the mews house to meet this mysterious and vanished Morrison or, indeed, whether she wanted such secrets

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as she may have had to be dragged out in a trial which could no longer have any interest for her.

"The power of evil is everywhere, Rumpole. And I'm afraid everywhere includes our own Chambers at Equity Court. That is why I have sought you out, although one doesn't like to spend too much time in these places."

"Does one not?" I consider any hour wasted which is not passed with a hand round a comforting glass of Château Thames Embankment in Pommeroy's haven of rest.

"Passive alcoholism, Rumpole." Sam Ballard, who, I imagine, gets his hair shirts from the Army & Navy Stores and whose belligerent puritanism makes Praise-God-Barebones look like Giovanni Casanova, had crept up on me at the bar and abandoned himself to a slimline tonic. "You've heard of passive smoking, of course?"

"I've heard of it. Although, I have to say, I prefer the active variety."

"Passive alcoholism's the same thing. Abstainees can absorb the fumes from neighbouring drinkers and become alcoholics. Quite easily."

"Is that one of Matey's medical theories?" Sam Ballard, of course, had fallen for the formidable Mrs. Marguerite Plumstead, the Old Bailey matron, and made her his bride, an act which lends considerable support to the theory that love is blind.

"Marguerite is, of course, extremely well informed on all health problems. So now, when we ask colleagues to dinner, we make it clear that our house is an alcohol-free zone."

This colleague thought, with some gratitude, that the Ballard house in Waltham Cross would also be Rumpole-free in the future. "But that wasn't why I wanted a word in confidence, Rumpole. I need to enlist your help, as a senior, in years anyway, a very senior member of Equity Court. A grave crime has been committed."

"Oh my God!" I did my best to look stricken. "Some bandit hasn't pinched the nail-brush again?"

"I'm afraid, Rumpole"—Ballard looked as though he were about to announce the outbreak of the Black Death, or at least the Hundred Years War—"this goes beyond pilfering in the downstairs toilet."

"Not nail-brush nicking this time, eh?"

"No, Rumpole. This time it would appear to be forgery, false pretence, and obtaining briefs by fraud." I lit another small cigar which

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had the desired effect of making Ballard tell his story as rapidly as possible, like a man with a vital message to get out before the poison gas rises above his head. It seemed that Miss Tricia Benbow—a somewhat ornate lady solicitor in whom Henry finds, when she enters his clerk's room with the light behind her, a distinct resemblance to the late Princess Grace of Monaco—had sent a brief in some distant and unappetizing County Court (Snaresbrook, Luton, or Land's End, for all I can remember) to young David Inchcape, whose legal career was in its tyro stages. Someone, as this precious brief was lying in the clerk's room, scratched out Inchcape's name and substituted that of Claude Erskine-Brown, who duly turned up at the far-flung Court to the surprise of Miss Benbow, who had expected a younger man. An inquiry was instituted and, within hours, Sherlock Ballard, Q.C. was on the case. Henry denied all knowledge of the alteration, which seemed to have occurred before he entered the brief in his ledger, young Inchcape looked hard-done-by, and Claude Erskine-Brown, whose performances in Court were marked by a painstaking attention to the letter of the law, emerged as public enemy number one.

"That quality of evil is all pervasive." The slimline tonic seemed to have gone to Ballard's head. He spoke in an impressive whisper and his eyes glittered with all the enthusiasm of a Grand Inquisitor preparing for the *auto-da-fé*. "In my view it has entered into the character of Erskine-Brown."

Not much can be said in criticism of that misguided, and somewhat fatuous, old darling with whom I have shared Chambers at Equity Court for more years than we like to remember. Claude's taste for the headier works of Richard Wagner fills him with painful longings for young ladies connected with the legal profession, whom he no doubt sees as Rhine Maidens or mini-Valkyries in wig and gown. In Court his behaviour can vacillate between the ponderous and the panic-stricken, so those who think unkindly of him, among whom I do not number myself, might reasonably describe him as a pompous twit. All that having been said, the soul of Claude Erskine-Brown is about as remote from evil as Pommeroy's plonk is from Château Latour.

"Claude would be flattered to hear you say he was evil," I told our Head of Chambers. "He might feel he'd got a touch of the Nibelungens or something."

"I noticed it from the time we did that case about the dirty restaurant. He wanted to conceal the fact that he'd been dining there with

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his female instructing solicitor. From what I remember, he wanted to mislead the Court about it."*

"Well, that's true," I conceded. "Old Claude, so far as I can see, conducts his love life with the minimum of sexual satisfaction and the maximum amount of embarrassment to all concerned. If you want to call that evil . . . "

"A man who wishes to deceive his wife is quite capable of deceiving his Head of Chambers." For a moment I caught in Ballard's voice an echo of that moral certainty which characterizes the judgments of She Who Must Be Obeyed.

"How do you know he'd deceive you? Have you asked him if he put his name on the brief?"

"I'm afraid Erskine-Brown has added perjury to his other offences."

"You mean he denied it?"

"Hotly."

"No one in the clerk's room did it?"

"Henry and Dianne say they didn't and I'm prepared to accept their evidence. Rumpole, when it comes to crime, you have considerably more experience than any of us."

"Thank you very much."

"I want to undertake a thorough investigation of this matter. Examine the witnesses. And if Erskine-Brown's found guilty . . . "

"What, then?"

"You know as well as I do, Rumpole. There is no place in Equity Court for fellows who pinch other fellows' briefs."

I gave Soapy Sam the chance of a little passive enjoyment of the heady fumes of Château Fleet Street and thought the matter over. Poor old Claude was probably guilty. The starring role played by his wife, Phillida, now luxuriously wrapped in the silk gown of Q.C., in so many long-running cases must have made him despondent about his own practice, which varied between the second-rate and the mediocre. The sight of a brief delivered by a solicitor he fancied sufficiently to fill up with priceless delicacies at La Maison Jean-Pierre to a white-wig must have wounded him deeply.

Moreover, it had to be remembered that he had admitted young Inchcape to our Chambers under the impression that he was thereby proving his tolerance to those of the gay persuasion, only to discover that Inchcape was in fact a closet heterosexual and his successful

* *See "Rumpole à la Carte."*

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rival for the favors of Mizz Liz Probert.* All these were mitigating factors which would spring instantly to the mind of one who always acted for the Defence. They were already outweighing any horror I might have felt at the crime he had probably committed.

"I'm sorry, Ballard." Our leader was still alongside me, his nose pointedly aimed from the direction of the glass that contained my ever-diminishing double red. "I can't help you. It's the second time today I've been asked; but prosecution isn't my line of country. Rumpole always defends."

Not long after that events occurred which persuaded me to change my mind, with results which may have an incalculable effect on whatever is left of my future.

It was that grim season of the year, which now begins around the end of August and reaches its climax in the first week of December, known as the "build-up to Christmas." I have often thought that if the Son of Man had known what he was starting he would have chosen to be born on a quiet summer's day when everyone was off on holiday on what the Timson family always refers to as the Costa del Crime. As it was, crowds of desperate shoppers were elbowing their way to the bus stops in the driving rain. More crammed aboard as we crawled through the West End, where the ornamental lights had been switched on. I sat contemplating the tidings of great joy She Who Must Be Obeyed had brought to me a few weeks earlier. That very night her old school friend, Charmian Nichols, was to arrive to spend the festive season *à côté de chez* Rumpole in the Gloucester Road.

Readers of these chronicles will only have heard, up till now, of one of the old girls who sported with my wife, Hilda, on the fields of Bexhill Ladies College when the world was somewhat younger than it is today. You will recall the redoubtable Dodo Mackintosh, painter in watercolor and maker of "cheesy bits" for our Chambers parties, who regards Rumpole with a beady, not to say suspicious, eye, whenever she comes to call. Dodo's place, on this particular Christmas, had been taken by Charmian Nichols. Charlie Nichols, no doubt exhausted by the wear and tear of marriage to a star, who had been not only a monitor and captain of hockey, but winner of

* *See "Rumpole and the Quality of Life" in* Rumpole and the Age of Miracles, *Penguin Books, 1988.*

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the Leadership and Character trophy for two years in succession, had dropped off the twig quite early in the run up to Christmas, and the widowed Charmian wrote to Hilda indicating that she had nothing pencilled in for the festive season and was inclined to grant us the favor of her company in the Gloucester Road. She added, in a brief postscript, that if Hilda had made a prior commitment to that "dowdy little Dodo Mackintosh" she would quite understand. She Who Must Be Obeyed, in whose breast Mrs. Nichols was able to awaken feelings of awe and wonder which had lain dormant during our married life, immediately bought a new eiderdown for the spare bedroom and broke the news to Dodo that there would be no room at the inn owing to family commitments. You see it took the winner of the Leadership and Character trophy to lure Hilda to perjury.

"Hilda, dear. Why ever can't you persuade Howard to buy a new Crock-a-Gleam? Absolutely no one plunges their hands into washing-up bowls any more. Of course, it is rather sweetly archaic of you both to still be doing it."

The late Dean Swift, in one of those masterpieces of English literature which I shall never get around to reading, spoke of a country, I believe, ruled by horses, and there was a definite air of equine superiority about La Nichols. She stood, for a start, several hands higher than Rumpole. Her nostrils flared contemptuously, her eyes were yellowish, and her greying mane was carefully combed and braided. She was, I had noticed, elegantly shod and you could have seen your face in her polished little hooves. She would, I devoutly hoped, be off with a thoroughbred turn of speed as soon as Christmas was over.

"You mean, get a dishwasher?" Hilda no longer trusted me to scour the plates to her satisfaction and Charmian had taken my place with the teacloth, dabbing a passable portrait of the Tower of London at our crockery and not knowing where to put it away. "Oh, Rumpole and I are always talking about that, but we never seem to get around to buying one." This was another example of the widow's fatal effect on She's regard for the truth; to the best of my recollection the word "dishwasher" had never passed our lips.

"Well, surely, Harold," Charmian whinnied at me over the glass she was polishing mercilessly, "you're going to buy Hilda something white for Christmas?"

"You mean handkerchiefs? I hadn't thought of that. And the name is Horace, but as you're here for Christmas with the family you can call me Rumpole."

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"No, white! A machine to wash plates and things like that? Charlie had far too much respect for my hands to let them get into a state like poor Hilda's." At this, she looked at my wife with deep sympathy and rattled on, "Charlie insisted that I could only keep my looks if I was fully automated. Of course I just couldn't have lived the life I did without our Plan-ahead 'archive' freezer, our jumbo-microwave and rotisserie." Something snapped beneath the teacloth at this point. "Oh, Hilda. One of your glasses gone for a Burton! Was it terribly precious?"

"Not really. It was a Christmas present from Dodo. From what I can remember."

"Oh, well then." Charmian shot the shattered goblet, a reasonably satisfactory container for Pommeroy's Perfectly Ordinary, into the tidy-bin. "But surely Hammond can afford to mechanize you, Hilda? He's always in Court from what you said in your letters."

"Legal aid defences," Hilda told her gloomily, "don't pay for much machinery."

"Legal aid!" Charmian pronounced the words as though they constituted a sort of standing joke, like kippers or mothers-in-law. "Isn't that a sort of National Health? Charlie was always really sorry for our poor little doctor in Guildford who had to pig along on that!"

I wanted to say that I didn't suppose old Charlie had much use for legal aid in his stockbroking business, but I restrained myself. Nor did I explain that our budget was well off balance since our cruise,* which had taken a good deal more than Hilda's late aunt's money, that legal aid fees had been cut and were paid at the pace of a handicapped snail, and that whenever I succeeded in cashing a cheque at the Caring Bank I had to restrain myself from making a dash for the door before they remembered our overdraft. Instead, I have to admit, something about the condescending Charmian, as she looked with vague amusement around our primitive kitchen equipment, made me want to impress her on her own, unadmirable terms.

"As a matter of fact," I said, casually filling one of Dodo's remaining glasses, "I don't only do legal aid defences. I get offered quite a few private prosecutions. They can be extremely lucrative."

"Really, Rumpole. Just how lucrative?" Hilda stood transfixed, her rubber gloves poised above the bubbling Fairy Liquid, waiting

* *See "Rumpole at Sea" in* Rumpole à la Carte, *Penguin Books, 1988.*

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for the exact figures. The next morning, when I arrived at my Chambers in Equity Court, Henry told me.

"Two thousand pounds, Mr. Rumpole. And I've agreed refreshers at five hundred a day. They've promised to send a cheque down with the brief."

"And it's a case likely to last a day or two?" I stood awestruck at the price put upon my prosecution of Christopher Jago.

"We have got it down, Mr. Rumpole, for two weeks." I did some not so swift calculations, mental arithmetic never having been my strongest point, and then came to a firm decision. "Henry," I said, "your lady wife, the Mayor of Bexleyheath . . . "

"No longer, Mr. Rumpole. Her year of office being over, she has returned to mere alderman."

"So you, Henry"—I congratulated the man warmly—"are no longer Lady Mayoress?"

"Much to my relief, Mr. Rumpole, I have handed in my chain."

"Henry, you'll be able to tell me. Does the alderman ever plunge her ex-mayoral hands into the Fairy Liquid?"

"Hardly, Mr. Rumpole. We have had a Crock-a-Gleam for years. You know, we're fully automated."

Well, of course, I might have said, on a clerk's fee you would be, wouldn't you? It's only penurious barristers who are still slaving away with the dishcloth. Instead I made an expansive gesture. "Go out, Henry," I bade him, "into the highways and byways of Oxford Street. Order up the biggest, whitest, most melodiously purring Crock-a-Gleam that money can buy and have it dispatched to Mrs. Rumpole at Froxbury Mansions with the compliments of the season."

"You're going to prosecute in Jago then, Mr. Rumpole?" Henry looked as surprised as if I had announced I meant to spend Christmas in a temperance hotel.

"Well, yes, Henry. I just thought I'd try my hand at it. For a change."

Finally, my clerk declined a trip up Oxford Street but Dianne, who was busily engaged in reading her horoscope in *Woman's Own* and decorating her finger nails for Christmas, undertook to ring John Lewis on my behalf. At which moment my learned friend Claude Erskine-Brown entered the clerk's room looking about as happy as a man who has paid through the nose for tickets for *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* and found himself at an evening of

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"Come Dancing." He noted, lugubriously, that there were no briefs in his tray—even those with other people's names on them—and then drew me out into the passage for a heart to heart.

"It's a good thing you were in the clerk's room just then, Rumpole."

"Oh, is it? Why exactly?"

"Well. Ballard says he doesn't want me to go in there unless some other member of Chambers is present. What's he think I'm going to do? Forge my fee notes or ravish Dianne?"

"Probably both."

"It's unbelievable."

"Perhaps. We've got to remember that Ballard specializes in believing the unbelievable. He also thinks you're sunk in sin. He's probably afraid of getting passive sinning by standing too close to you."

"Rumpole. About that wretched brief in the Rickmansworth County Court . . . "

"Oh, was it Rickmansworth? I thought it was Luton." I was trying to avoid the moment that barristers dread—when your client looks at you in a trusting and confidential manner and seems about to tell you that he's guilty of the charge on which you've been paid to defend him.

"Rumpole, I wanted to tell you . . . "

"Please, don't, old darling," I spoke as soothingly as I knew to the deeply distressed Claude. "We all know the feeling. Acute shortage of crime affecting one's balance of payments. Nothing in your tray, nothing in the diary. The bank manager and the taxman hammering on the door. The VAT man climbing in at the window. Then you wander into the clerk's room and all the briefs seem to be for other people. Well, heaven knows how many times I've been tempted."

"But I didn't do it, Rumpole. I mean I'd've been mad to do it. It was bound to get found out in the end."

Many crimes, in my experience, are committed by persons undergoing temporary fits of insanity, who are bound to be found out in the end, but I didn't think it tactful to mention this. Instead I asked, "What about the handwriting on the changed brief?"

"It's in block letters. Not like mine, or anyone else's either. All the same, Ballard seems to have appointed himself judge, jury, and handwriting expert. Rumpole"—Claude's voice sank in horror—"I think he wants me out of Chambers."

"I wouldn't be surprised."

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"What on earth's Philly going to say?" The man lived in growing awe of Phillida Erskine-Brown, Q.C., the embarrassingly successful Portia of our Chambers. "I should think she'd be very glad to have you at home to do the washing up," I comforted him. "That is, unless you have a Crock-a-Gleam like the rest of us."

"Rumpole, please. This is no joking matter."

"Everything, in my humble opinion, is a joking matter."

"I want you to defend me."

"Do you? Ballard's asked me to fill an entirely different role."

"You!" The unfortunate Claude gave me a look of horror. "But you don't ever prosecute, do you?"

"Well"—I did my level best to cheer the man up—"hardly ever."

I passed on up to my room, where I lit a small cigar and reopened the papers in the Jago case, which I read with a new interest since Henry had dealt with the little matter of my fee. I looked at the photograph of the big, plain victim and thought again how little she looked like her trim and elegant father and brother. I went through the account of Jago's statements, and decided that even the clumsiest cross-examiner could ridicule his unconvincing explanations. I turned the pages of a photostat of Veronica Fabian's diary and learnt, for the first time, that she had had six previous appointments with the man called Arthur Morrison, and I wondered why the name seemed to mean something to me. Then the door was flung open and an extremely wrathful Mizz Liz Probert came into my presence.

"Well," she said, "you've really deserted us for the enemy now, haven't you, Rumpole."

"I haven't been listening to the news." I tried to be gentle with her. "Are we at war?"

"Don't pretend you don't know what I mean. Henry's told me all about it. In my opinion it's as contemptible as acting for a landlord who's trying to evict a one-parent family on supplementary benefit. You've gone over to the Prosecution."

"Not gone over"—I did my best to reassure the inflamed daughter of Red Ron Probert, once the firebrand leader of the South-East London Labour Council—"just there on a visit."

"Just visiting the establishment, the powers that be, the Old Bill. Just there on a friendly call? How comfortable, Rumpole. How cosy. You know what I always admired about you?"

"Not exactly. Do remind me."

"Oh, yes. No wonder you've forgotten, now you've taken up prosecution. Well, I admired the fact that you were always on the side of

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the underdog. You stopped the Judges sending everyone to the nick. You showed up the police. You stood up for the underprivileged." Liz Probert was using almost the same words as the Fabians, but now she said, "And you, of all people, are being paid by some posh family of ritzy estate agents to cook up a case against a bit of a naff member of their profession. They're narked he's been let free just because there isn't any evidence against him."

"Let me enlighten you." My tone, as always, was sweetly reasonable. "There is plenty of evidence against him."

"Like the fact that he never went to a 'decent public school' like the Fabians?"

"And like the fact that he scooted out of the country when he found the body instead of telephoning the police."

"Oh, I'm sure you'll find lots of effective points to make against him!" Hell hath no fury like an outraged radical lawyer, and Mizz Probert's outrage did for her what a large Pommeroy's plonk did for me—it made her extremely eloquent. "You'll be able to argue him into a life sentence with a twenty-five-year recommendation. Probably you'll get the thanks of the Judge, an invitation to the serious crimes squad dinner dance and a weekend's shooting at the Fabians' place in Hampshire. I don't know why you did it—or, rather, I know only too well."

"Why, do you think?"

"Henry told me." Then she took, as I sometimes do, to poetry: "'Just for a handful of silver he left us.' You're always quoting Wordsworth."

"I do. Except that's by Browning. *About* Wordsworth."

"About him, is it? 'The Lost Leader'? Well. No wonder you like Wordsworth so much."

All this was hardly complimentary to Rumpole or, indeed, to the Old Sheep of the Lake District whose job in the stamp office had earned him the fury of the young Robert Browning. I wasn't thinking of this, however, as Liz Probert continued her flow of denunciation. I was thinking of the unfortunate Claude Erskine-Brown and the way he had spoken to me in the passage. He had seemed angry, puzzled, depressed, but not, strangely enough, guilty.

It's rare for a criminal hack to be invited into his customer's home. We represent a part of their lives they would prefer to forget. Not only do they not ask us to dinner, but when catching sight of us at parties years after we have sprung them from detention they look

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studiously in the opposite direction and pretend we never met. No one, I suppose, wants the neighbors to spot the sturdy figure of Rumpole climbing their front steps. I may give rise to speculation as to whether it's murder, rape, or merely a nice clean fraud that's going on in their family. The Fabians were different. Clearly they felt that they had, as representatives of law and order, nothing to be ashamed of, indeed much to be proud of in the way they were pursuing justice, in spite of the curious lassitude of the police and the Director of Public Prosecutions. Mrs. Fabian, it seemed, suffered from arthritis and rarely left the house so my discreet and highly respected solicitor, Francis Pyecraft (of Pyecraft & Wensleydale), and my good self were invited there for drinks. The dead girl's mother wanted to look us over and grant us her good housekeeping seal of approval.

"It's not knowing, that's the worst thing, Mr. Rumpole," Mrs. Fabian told me. "I feel I could learn to live with it, if I knew just *how* Veronica died."

"You mean who killed her?"

"Yes, of course, that's what I mean."

I didn't like to tell her that a criminal trial, before a judge, who comes armed with his own prejudices, and a jury, whose attention frequently wanders, may be a pretty blunt instrument for prising out the truth. Instead, I looked at her and wondered if couples are attracted by physical likeness. Mrs. Fabian was as small-boned, clear-featured, and neat as her husband and son. And yet they had produced a big-boned and plain daughter, who had stumbled, no doubt unwittingly, on death.

"Perhaps you could tell me a little more about Veronica. I mean about her life. Boyfriends?"

"No." Mrs. Fabian shook her head. "That was really the trouble. She didn't seem to be able to find one. At least, not one that cared about her." We sat in the high living room of a house overlooking the canal in Little Venice. Tall bookshelves stretched to the ceiling, a pair of loud speakers tinkled with appropriate baroque music. The white walls were hung with grey drawings which looked discreetly expensive. Young Roger moved among us, replenishing our glasses. The curtains hadn't been drawn and Mrs. Fabian sat on a sofa looking out into the winter darkness, almost as though she was still expecting her daughter to come home early on yet another evening without a date. Veronica's mother, father, and brother, I imagined,

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never found it difficult to find people who cared about them. Only their daughter had to get on without love.

"She worked in your firm. What were her other interests?"

"Oh, she read enormously. She had an idea she wanted to be a writer and she did some things for her school magazine, which were rather good, I thought," Gregory told me.

"*Very* good." Mrs. Fabian gave the dead girl her full support.

"She never got much further than that, I'm afraid. I suggested she came and worked for us, and then she could write in her spare time. If she seemed to be going to make a success of it—the writing, I mean—of course, I'd've supported her." "Just do a little estate agency, darling, until you publish a bestseller." I could imagine the charm with which Gregory Fabian had said it, and his daughter, unsure of her talent, had agreed. A fatal arrangement; if she had stuck to literature, she would never have kept an appointment in a Notting Hill Gate mews.

"What did she read?"

"Oh, all sorts of things. Mainly nineteenth-century authors. She used to talk about becoming a novelist."

"Her favorites were the Brontës," Mrs. Fabian remembered.

"Oh, yes. The Brontës. Charlotte, especially. She had a very romantic nature." Veronica's father smiled, I thought, with understanding.

"This man Morrison," I said, "whoever he may be, keeps turning up in the desk diary. No one in the office's ever heard of him. He's never been a client of yours?"

"Not so far as I've been able to discover. There's no correspondence with him."

"You don't know a friend of hers by that name?"

"We've asked, of course. No one's ever heard of him."

I got up and crossed to the darkened window. Looking out, all I could see was myself reflected in the glass, a comfortably padded Old Bailey hack with a worried expression, engaged in the strange pursuit of prosecution.

"But in her diary she seems to have had six previous appointments with him."

"Of course"—Mrs. Fabian was smiling at me apologetically, as though she hardly liked to point out anything so obvious—"we don't know everything about her. You never do, do you? Even about your own daughter."

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"All right, then. What do you know about Christopher Jago? You must have come across him in the way of business."

"Not really." Gregory Fabian stopped smiling. "He has, well, a different type of business."

"And does it in a different sort of way," his son added.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, we've heard things. You do hear things . . . "

"What sort of things?"

"Undervaluing houses. Getting their owners to sell cheap to a chap who's really a friend of the agent. The friend sells on for the right price and he and the agent divide up the profits."

"We've no evidence of that," Gregory told me. "It wouldn't be right for you to assume that's what he was doing. Apparently he's rather a flashy type of operator, but that's really all we know about him."

"He's a cowboy." Roger was more positive. "And he looks the part."

They were silent then, it seemed, for a moment, fearful of the mystery that had disturbed their gentle family life. Roger crossed the room behind me and drew the curtains, shutting out the dark.

"She wasn't robbed. She hadn't been sexually assaulted. So far as we know she hadn't quarrelled with anyone and Jago didn't even know her. Why on earth should he want to kill her?" I asked the Fabians and they continued to sit in silence, puzzled and sad.

"The police couldn't answer that question either," I said. "Perhaps that's why they let him go."

I left the house on my own, as Pyecraft was staying to discuss the effect of the girl's death on certain family trusts. Gregory came down to the hall and, as he helped me on with my coat, he said quietly, "I don't know if Francis Pyecraft explained to you about Veronica."

"No. What about her?"

"As a matter of fact she's not our daughter."

"Not?"

"No. After Roger was born, we so wanted a girl. Evelyn couldn't have any more children, so we adopted. Of course, we loved her just as much as Roger. But now, well, it seems to make it even more important that she should be treated justly." Again, I thought, he was talking as though Veronica were still alive and eagerly awaiting the result of the trial. Then he said, "There's always one child that you feel needs special protection."

Christmas came and we sat in the kitchen around the white coffin of the Crock-a-Gleam which flashed, sighed, belched a few times,

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and delivered up our crockery. As I rescued the burning-hot plates from a cloud of steam, the widow Charmian said, "At least I've made Howard cough up a dishwasher for you, Hilda. I've managed to do that."

"It wasn't you"—I had long given up trying to persuade our visitor to use my correct name—"that made me buy it."

"Oh?" Charmian was miffed. "Who was it, then?"

"I suppose whoever killed Veronica Fabian." I don't know why it was that Charmian gave me a distinct touch of the Scrooges. Later, when we opened our presents in the sitting room, I bestowed on Hilda the gift of lavender water, which I think she now uses for lying-down purposes, and I discovered that the three pairs of darkish socks, wrapped in holly-patterned paper, were exactly what I wanted. Hilda opened a small glass jar, which contained some white cream that smelled faintly of hair oil and vaseline.

"Oh, how lovely." She Who Must Be Obeyed was doing her best not to sound underwhelmed. "What is it, Charmian?"

"Special homeopathic skin beautifier, Hilda dear." Charmian was tearing open the wafer-thin china early-morning tea set on which we had, I was quite convinced, spent far too much. "We've got to do something about those poor toil-worn hands of yours, haven't we? And is this really for me?" She looked at her present with more than faint amusement. "What funny little cups and saucers. And how very sweet of you to go out and buy them. Or was it another old Christmas present from Dodo Mackintosh?" It says a great deal for the awe in which Hilda held her, and my own iron self-control, that neither of us got up and beaned the woman with our Christmas tree.

After a festive season of this nature, it may not surprise you to know that I took an early opportunity to return to my place of business in Equity Court, where I found not much business going on. Such few barristers and clerks as were visible seemed to be in a state of somnambulism. I made for Pommeroy's Wine Bar, where even the holly seemed to be suffering from a hangover and my learned friend Claude Erskine-Brown was toying, in a melancholy and aloof fashion, with a half bottle of Pommeroy's more upmarket St. Emilion-type red.

"You're wandering lonely as a Claude," I told him. "Did you come up to work?"

"I came," he said dolefully, "because I couldn't stay at home."

"Because of Christmas visitors?"

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"No. Because of the shrink."

I didn't catch the fellow's drift. Had his wits turned and did he imagine some strange diminution in size of his Islington home, so he could no longer crawl in at the front door?

"The what?"

"The shrink. Phillida knows all about the case of the altered brief. Ballard told her."

"Ah, yes." I knew my Soapy Sam. "I bet he enjoyed that."

"She was very understanding."

"You said you were innocent, and she believed you?"

"No. She didn't believe me. She was just very understanding."

"Ah."

"She said it was the mid-life crisis. It happens to people in middle age. Mainly women who pinch things in Sainsbury's. But Philly thinks quite a lot of men go mad as well. So she said it was a sort of cry for help and she'd stand by me, provided I went to a shrink."

"So?"

"It seemed easier to agree somehow." Poor old Claude, the fizz had quite gone out of him and he had volunteered to join the great army of the maladjusted. "She fixed me up with a Dr. Gertrude Hauser who lives in Belsize Park."

"Oh, yes. And what did Dr. Gertrude have to say?"

"Well, first of all, she had this rather disgusting old sofa with a bit of Kleenex on the pillow. She made me lie down on that, so I felt a bit of a fool. Then she asked me about my childhood, so I told her. Then she said the whole trouble was that I wanted to sleep with my mother."

"And did you?"

"What?"

"Want to sleep with your mother."

"Of course not. Mummy would never have stood for it."

"I suppose not."

"Quite honestly, Rumpole. Mummy was an absolute sweetie in many ways, but—well, no offence to you, of course—she was *corpulent*. I didn't fancy her in the least."

"Did you tell Gertrude that?"

"Yes. I said quite honestly I wouldn't have slept with Mummy if we'd been alone on a desert island."

"What did the shrink say?"

"She said, 'I shall write down "fantasizes about being alone with his mother on a desert island." ' Quite honestly, I can't go and see Dr. Hauser again."

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"No. Probably not."

"All that talk about Mummy. It's really too embarrassing. She'd have hated it so, if she'd been alive."

"Yes, I do see. Excuse me a moment." I tore myself away from the reluctant patient to a corner in which I had seen Mizz Liz Probert settling down to a glass of Pommeroy's newly advertised organic plonk (the old plonk, I strongly suspected, with a new bright-green label on the bottle). There was a certain matter about which I needed to ask her further and better particulars.

"Look here, Liz." I pulled up a chair. "How did you know all that about Christopher Jago?"

"You can't sit there," she said. "I'm expecting Dave Inchcape."

"Just until he comes. How did you know that Jago didn't go to a public school, for instance?"

"He told me."

"You met him?"

"Oh, yes. Dave and I got our flat through him. And I have to tell you, Rumpole, that he was absolutely honest, reliable, and trustworthy throughout the whole transaction." I had forgotten that Liz and Dave were now co-mortgagees and living happily ever after somewhere off Ladbroke Grove.

"What do you mean, he was honest and reliable?"

"Well. We got our place pretty cheaply, compared to the price Fabian & Winchelsea were asking for the other flats we saw. He never put up the price or let us be gazumped by other clients, and he helped us fix up our mortgage. Oh, and he didn't conk me on the head with a Zulu knobkerrie."

"Yes. I can see that. What else about him? Did he have a wife, girlfriend—anything like that?"

"Hundreds of girlfriends, I should think. He's rather attractive. Tall, fair, and handsome. So you see, I shan't be giving evidence for the Prosecution."

"I imagine from what you said, you wouldn't come and take a note for me? Act as my junior?"

"You must be joking!" Mizz Liz took a gulp of the alleged organic brew and looked at me with contempt.

"I'll have to ask your co-habitee."

"Save your breath. Tricia Benbow's already briefed Dave for the Defence. He knows I'd never speak to him again if he took part in a prosecution."

"Christopher Jago's gone to La Belle Benbow?"

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"Oh, yes. He asked me if I knew a brilliant solicitor and said he preferred women in his life, so I sent him off to her."

"But Dave Inchcape's not doing the case alone? I mean no offence to him but he's still only a white-wig."

"He's got a leader."

"Who?" A foeman, I rather hoped, worthy of my steel. Liz looked at me in silence for a moment, as though she was relishing the news she had to impart.

"Our Head of Chambers," she told me.

"Heavens above!" I nearly choked on my non-organic chemically produced Château Ordinaire. " 'Thus the whirligig of time brings in his revenges.' Rumpole for the Prosecution and Ballard for the Defence. He'd better sit close to me. He might catch some passive advocacy."

On my way out, I had a message for Claude Erskine-Brown, who was still palely loitering. "Come and help me in the 'Mews Murder,' " I said. "Be my hard-working junior. Take your mind off your mother."

"Rumpole!" The man looked pained and I hastened to comfort him. "At least you'll find someone who's deeper in the manure than you are, old darling," I said.

Being in possession of two such contradictory views of Christopher Jago as those provided by the Fabians and Mizz Liz Probert, I decided that a little investigative work was necessary.

I could hardly ask Francis Pyecraft to hang round such pubs as Jago might frequent, so I called in the services of my old friend and colleague, Ferdinand Isaac Gerald Newton, known as Fig Newton to the trade. You could pass through many bars and hardly notice the doleful, lantern-jawed figure, sitting in a quiet corner, nursing half a pint of Guinness, and apparently engrossed in the *Times* crossword puzzle which he solves, I am ashamed to say, in almost less time than it takes me to spot the quotations. But he hoovers up every scrap of gossip and information dropped within a surprisingly wide radius. You can't make bricks without straw and Fig is straw-purveyor to the best Old Bailey defenders. Now he would have a chance, as I had, of seeing life from the prosecution side.

I met him a couple of weeks later in Pommeroy's. He was suffering, as usual, from a bad cold, having been up most of the night keeping watch on a block of flats in a matrimonial matter, but between some heavy work with the handkerchief he was able to tell

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me a good deal. Our quarry lived in a 1930s house near Shepherd's Bush Road, the ground floor of which served as his office. He drove an electric-blue Alfa-Romeo, the car which had led to his arrest. He was well-known in a number of pubs round Maida Vale and Notting Hill Gate, where many of the properties he dealt in were situated. He was unmarried but went out with a succession of girls, his taste running to young and pretty blonde secretaries and receptionists. None of them lasted very long and in the Benedict Arms, one of his favourite resorts near the Regent's Canal, the bar staff would lay bets on how soon any girl would go.

There was one notable exception, however, to the stage army of desirable young women. On half a dozen occasions, the suspect had come into the Benedict Arms with a big, awkward, pale, and rather unattractive girl. They had sat in a corner, away from the crowd, and appeared to have had a lot to say to each other. When Fig told me that, the penny dropped. I smote the table in my excitement, rattling the glasses and attracting the stares of the legal hacks busy drinking around us. I had just remembered what I knew about Arthur Morrison.

On my way home I went to check the facts in the library, for Veronica Fabian had no doubt known a great deal more than I did about minor novelists in the last century. Arthur Morrison, a prolific author, was born in 1863 and lived on into the Second World War. His best-known book about life in the East End of London was published in 1896. It was called *A Child of the Jago*.

I put the *Companion to English Literature* back on the library shelf with a feeling of relief. God was in his heaven: the widow Charmian, despite a pressing invitation to stay from Hilda, had gone back to Guildford, and the first prosecution I had ever undertaken seemed likely to be a winner. As I have said, I find it very difficult to embark on any case without being dead set on victory.

"May it please you, my Lord, Members of the Jury. I appear in this case with my learned friend, Mr. Claude Erskine-Brown, for the Prosecution. The Defence of Christopher Jago is in the hands of my learned friends, Mr. Samuel Ballard and Mr. David Inchcape." As I uttered these unaccustomed words, I had the unusual experience of the scarlet Judge on the Bench welcoming me with the sort of ingratiating smile he usually reserved for visiting Supreme Court justices or extremely pretty lady plaintiffs entering the witness-box.

"Did you say you were here to *prosecute?*"

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"That is so, my Lord."

"Members of the Jury"—Mr. Justice Oliphant, as was his wont, spoke to the ladies and gents in the jury-box as though they were a group of educationally subnormal children with hearing defects—"Mr. Rumpole is going to outline the story of this case to you. In perfectly simple terms. Isn't that right, Mr. Rumpole?"

"I hope so, my Lord."

"So my advice to you is to sit quietly and give him your full attention. The Defence will have its chance later." This reference caused Soapy Sam Ballard to lift his posterior from the bench and smile winsomely, an overture which Mr. Justice "Ollie" Oliphant completely ignored. Ollie comes from the northern circuit and prides himself on being a rough diamond who uses his robust common sense. I hoped he wasn't going to try to help me too much. Most acquittals occur when the Judge sickens the Jury by over-egging the prosecution pudding.

So we went to work in Number One Court. The two neat Fabians, father and son, sat in front of me. The man in the dock couldn't have been a greater contrast to them. He was tall, two or three inches over six feet, with a winter suntan that must have been kept going with a lamp, as well as visits to Marbella. His hair, clearly the victim of many hours' work with a blow-dryer, was bouffant at the front and, at the back, swept almost down to his shoulders. His drooping moustache and the broad bracelet of his watch were the colour of old gold and his suit, like his car, might have been described as electric blue. He looked less like the cowboy Roger Fabian had called him than a professional footballer whose private and professional life is in a continual mess. He lounged between two officers in the dock, with his long legs stuck out in front of him, affecting alternate boredom and amusement. Underneath it all, I thought, he was probably terrified.

So there I was, opening my case to the Jury in as neutral a way as I knew how. I described the little mews house as I remembered it when I went to inspect the scene of the crime: the cramped rooms, the chill feeling of the home unused, the African carvings and weapons on the wall. I asked the Jury to picture the girl from the estate agents' office, who was waiting in the hallway, with the front door left open, to greet the man who had telephoned her.

Who was it? Was it Mr. Morrison? Or was that a name she used to hide the identity of someone she knew quite well? I took the Jury through my theory that the literate Veronica had picked the name

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of the author of a book with Jago in the title. Then I waited for Ballard to shoot to his feet, as I would have done had I been defending, and denounce this as a vague and typical Rumpolean fantasy. I waited in vain. Ballard was inert, indeed there was an unusually contented smile on his face as he sat, perhaps deriving a little passive sensual satisfaction from the close and perfumed presence of his instructing solicitor, Miss Tricia Benbow.

"The Defence will no doubt argue that there is a real Arthur Morrison who met Veronica Fabian in the mews and killed her before Jago arrived on the scene."

Once again Ballard replied with a deafening silence as he stared appreciatively at the back of his solicitor's neck. My instincts as a defender got the better of me. Jago may have been a crooked estate agent with a lamentable private life and an appalling taste in suits, but he deserved to have the points in his favour put as soon as possible. "That's what you're going to argue, Ballard, isn't it?" I said in a *sotto voce* growl.

"Oh, yes." Ballard shot obediently to his feet. "If your Lordship pleases. It will be my duty to submit to your Lordship, in the fullness of time and entirely at your Lordship's convenience, of course, that the Jury will have to consider Morrison's part in this case very seriously, very seriously indeed."

"If there is a Morrison, Mr. Ballard. We have to use our common sense about that, don't we?" His Lordship intervened.

"Yes, of course. If your Lordship pleases." Ballard subsided without further struggle. The Judge's intervention had somewhat unnerved me. I felt like a tennis player, starting a friendly knock up, who suddenly sees the referee hurling bricks at his opponent.

"Of course, I can concede that we may be wrong about the reasons Veronica Fabian used that name when entering her eight thirty appointment."

"Use your common sense, Mr. Rumpole. Please." His Lordship's tone became distinctly less friendly. "Mr. Ballard hasn't asked you to concede anything. Your job is to present the prosecution case. Let's get on with it."

The Fabians, father and son, were looking up at me, and it was their plea for justice, rather than the disapproval of Oliver Oliphant, which made me return to the attack. "In any event, Members of the Jury, we intend to call evidence to prove that Jago was seeing the dead girl quite regularly, meeting her in a public house called the Benedict Arms and having long intimate conversations with her.

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There will also be evidence that he told the police—"

"That he'd never seen her before in his life!" Mr. Justice Oliphant was like the helpful wife who always supplies the punchline to the end of her husband's best stories.

"I was coming to that, my Lord."

"Come to it then, Mr. Rumpole. How long is this case expected to last?"

My reaction to that sort of remark was instinctive. "It will last, my Lord, for as long as it takes the Jury to consider every point both for and against the accused, and to decide if they can be sure of his guilt or not." I felt happier now, at home in my old position of arguing with the Judge. Ollie opened his mouth, no doubt to deliver himself of a little more robust common sense, but I went on before he could utter.

"The police decided not to charge Jago because there was no apparent motive for the crime. But if he knew Veronica Fabian, if they had some sort of relationship, they may have had to consider why he ran from that house, where Veronica was lying dead, and told no one what he had seen. Finally, Members of the Jury, it's for you to say why he lied to the police and said he never met her." And then I repeated the sentence I had used so often from the other side of the Court. "You won't convict him of anything unless you're certain sure that the only answer is he must be guilty. That's what we call the golden thread that runs through British justice."

So we began to call the evidence, produce the photographs, and listen to the monotonous tones of police officers refreshing their memories from their notebooks. When I was defending, such witnesses presented a challenge, each to be lured in a different way, with charm, authority, or lofty disdain, to produce some fragment of evidence which might help the customer in the dock. Now all I had to do was let them rattle on and so prosecuting seemed a dull business. Then we got the scene-of-the-crime officer, who produced the fatal knobkerrie, its end heavily rounded, still bloodstained and protected by cellophane, as was the three-foot black handle. Ballard, who had sat mum during this parade of prosecution evidence, showed no interest in examining this weapon and said he had no questions.

"What about the fingerprints?" I could no longer restrain myself from hissing at my so-called opponent, a foeman who, at the moment, was hardly being worthy of my attention, let alone my steel.

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"What about them?" Ballard whispered back in a sudden panic. "Jago's aren't there, are they?"

"Of course not!" By now my whisper had become entirely audible. "There are no fingerprints at all."

"Mr. Rumpole," the voice of robust common sense trumpeted from the Bench, "I thought you told us you appeared for the *Prosecution*. If Mr. Ballard wants to ask a question for the Defence no doubt he will get up on his hind legs and do so!" I rather doubted that but, in fact, Soapy Sam unwound himself, drew himself up to his full height, and said, as though a brilliant idea had just occurred to him, "Officer. Let me put this to you. There are absolutely no fingerprints of Christopher Jago's on the handle of that weapon, are there?"

"There are no fingerprints of any sort, my Lord."

"I'm very much obliged. Thank you, officer." Ballard bowed with great satisfaction and as he sat down I heard him tell his junior, Inchcape, "I'm glad I managed to winkle that out of him."

Later we got the officer who had been in charge of the investigation, Detective Chief Inspector Brush, and even though he was, for the first time in recorded history, my witness, I couldn't resist teasing him a little.

"Tell me, Chief Inspector. After the body was found, you spent a good deal of time and trouble looking for Arthur Morrison."

"We did, my Lord."

"In fact Morrison was always your number one suspect."

"He still is, my Lord."

"You don't accept that Arthur Morrison and Jago were one and the same person?"

There was a pause and then, "I suppose that may be a possibility."

"And that Arthur Morrison is nothing but a dead author."

"I don't know much about dead authors, Mr. Rumpole." There, at least, the Detective Chief Inspector was telling the truth.

"If you'd known that, whether or not Morrison existed, Jago had been meeting the dead girl regularly, would that have made any difference to the decision not to charge him?"

There was a long silence and then Brush admitted, "Well, yes, my Lord. I think it might."

"Let's use our common sense about this, shall we? Don't let's beat about the bush," Ollie intervened. "Jago told you he'd never met the girl. If you'd known he was lying, you'd've charged him."

"Yes, my Lord."

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"Well, there we are, Members of the Jury. We've got that clear at last, thanks to a little bit of down-to-earth common sense." Mr. Justice Oliphant had joined me as leader of the Prosecution. And that might have been that, but there was one other question someone had to ask and I couldn't rely on Ballard.

"You first questioned Mr. Jago because you had discovered that his car had been parked outside 13A Gissing Mews at the relevant time."

"Yes."

"You had no idea that he had been into the house and found the body?"

"At that time, no."

"So he volunteered that information entirely of his own accord?"

"That's right."

"Was that one of the reasons he wasn't charged?"

"That was one of the reasons we thought he was being honest with us, yes."

I sat down, having made Ballard's best point for him. Of course he had to totter to his feet and ruin it.

"And, so far as that goes, Chief Inspector"—Ballard stood, pleased with himself, rocking slightly on the balls of his feet—"do you still think he was being honest with you about the way he found the girl?"

"I'm not sure." Brush paused and then gave it back to the poor old darling, right between the eyes. "If he was lying to us about not knowing the girl, I can't be sure about any of his evidence, can I?" Mr. Justice Oliphant wrote down that answer and underlined it with his red pencil. The Fabians looked as though they were slightly more pleased with the way Ballard was doing his case than with my performance, but no doubt they'd be too polite to say so.

At the end of our evidence we called my old friend, Professor Andrew Ackerman, Ackerman of the Morgue, with whom I have spent many fascinating hours discussing bloodstains and gunshot wounds. He testified that Veronica Fabian had died from a heavy blow to the frontal bone of the skull, consistent with an attack by the knobkerrie, Exhibit P.1. I asked him if this must have been a blow straight down on her head, and he ruled out the possibility of it having been struck from either side. From the position of the wound it was clear to him that the club had been held by the end of the handle and swung in an upward trajectory. I felt that his evi-

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dence was important, but at the moment he gave it I didn't realize its full significance.

"So you're defending? I expect you have Mizz Liz Probert's full approval?" I was disarming in the robing-room, taking off the wig and gown and running a comb through what remains of my hair, when I found myself sharing a mirror with young Dave Inchcape.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, she thinks prosecuting's as bad as aiding merciless landlords to evict their tenants."

"I know she doesn't think you should be prosecuting."

"And I rather think," I told him as I got on the bow-tie and adjusted the silk handkerchief, "that Mr. Justice Ollie Oliphant would agree with her."

"By the way, I think we're doing pretty well for Chris, don't you? He's promised us a great party if we get him off." Dave Inchcape had fallen into the defender's habit of first-name familiarity with alleged criminals. I wondered if it were ever so and the robing-room once rang with cries of "I think we're going to get Hawley off—Hawley Crippin, of course.".

I walked back to Chambers with the still despondent Erskine-Brown, who had just been cut dead by Ballard and La Belle Benbow as they were coming out of the Ludgate Circus Palais de Justice.

"By the way, Claude," I said, "what was that case you're meant to have pinched from Inchcape all about?"

"Please"—the man looked at a passing bus, as though tempted to dive under it—"don't remind me of it."

"But what was the subject matter? Just the gist, you understand."

"Well, it was a landlord's action for possession. Nothing very exciting."

"He wanted to turn out a one-parent family?"

"No. I think they were a couple of ladies in the Gay Rights movement. He said they were using the place to run a business. Why do you ask?"

"Because," I tried to encourage him, "the evidence you have just given may be of great importance." But Claude didn't look in the slightest cheered up.

No two characters could have been more contrary than Christopher Jago and his defence counsel. Jago lounged in the witness-box, flashed occasional smiles at the Jury, whose female members looked

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embarrassed and the males stony-faced. He was a bad witness, truculent, defensive, and flippant by turns, and Soapy Sam was finding it hard to conceal his deep disapproval of the blow-dried, shiny-suited giant he was defending.

As I had called several witnesses who said they had seen him with Veronica in the Benedict Arms, Jago no longer troubled to deny it. He said he first saw her in the pub at lunchtime with another girl from Fabians' whom he knew slightly and he bought them both a drink. Some time after that he saw her eating her lunch in a corner, alone with a book, and he talked to her.

"What did you talk about?" I asked when I came to cross-examine.

"The house business. Prices and that around the area. I didn't chat her up, if that's what you're suggesting. She wasn't the sort of girl I could ever fancy, even if I weren't pretty well looked after in that direction." He gave the Jury one of his least endearing grins.

"So why did you meet her so often?"

"I just happened to bump into her, that's all."

"It's not all, is it? Your meetings were planned. She entered five or six appointments with Morrison in her diary."

To my surprise he didn't answer with a blustering denial that he and Morrison were one and the same person. Had he forgotten his best line of defence, or was he overcome by that strange need to tell the truth that sometimes seems to attack even the most unsatisfactory witnesses? "All right then," he admitted. "She seemed to want to see me and we made a few dates to meet for a drink round the Benedict."

"Why did she want to see you?"

"Perhaps she fancied me. It has been known." He looked at the Jury, expecting a sympathetic giggle that never came. "I don't know why she wanted us to meet. You tell me."

"No, Mr. Jago. You tell us."

There was a silence then. Jago looked troubled and I thought that he was afraid of the evidence he would have to give.

"She was a bit scared to tell me about it. She said it would mean a lot of trouble if it got out."

"What was it, Mr. Jago?" I was breaking another of my rules and asking a question without knowing the answer. At that moment I was in search of the truth, a somewhat dangerous pursuit for a defence counsel, but then I wasn't defending Jago.

He answered my question then, quietly and reluctantly. "She was worried about what was happening at Fabians'."

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I saw my clients, the father and son, listening, composed and expressionless. They didn't try to stop me and by now it was too late to turn back. "What did she say was happening at Fabians'?"

"She said they gave the people who wanted to sell their houses very low valuations. Then they sold to some friend who looked independent, but who was really in business with them. The friend sold on at the proper price and they shared the difference. She reckoned they'd been doing that for years. On a pretty big scale, I imagine."

Gregory Fabian was writing me a note quite impassively. His son was flushed and looked so angry that I was afraid he was going to shout. But his father put a hand on his son's arm before he passed me his message. I remembered that Roger had said Jago practised the same fraud the Fabians were now being accused of.

"Why do you think she told you that?" I read Gregory's note then: HE'S TRYING TO RUIN US BECAUSE WE KNOW HE KILLED VERONICA. STOP HIM DOING IT.

I thought of the lonely girl who was trapped in a business she couldn't trust, pinning her faith on this unlikely companion. Perhaps she thought her confidences would bring them together. At any rate, they were an excuse to meet him.

"Mr. Jago, when you called at Gissing Mews that morning—"

"Like I told you. I was interested in the place for a client. I phoned Veronica and—"

"And you kept the appointment and found her dead in the hallway."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you telephone the police?"

"Because I was afraid."

"Afraid you'd be arrested for her murder?"

"No. Not afraid of that."

"Of what then?"

There are moments in some trials when everyone in Court seems to hold their breath, waiting for an answer. This was such an occasion and the answer when it came was totally unexpected.

"I thought she'd been done over because she'd told me what the Fabians were up to. I thought, That might be you, Christopher, if you get involved any more."

"*You* killed her!" Roger Fabian couldn't restrain himself now. Ollie Oliphant uttered some soothing words about understanding the strength of the family feelings, but urged the young man to use his common sense and keep quiet. I did my best to pull myself

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together and behave like a prosecuting counsel. I asked Jago to take Exhibit P.1 in his hand, which he did without apparent reluctance.

"I'm bound to put it to you," I said, "that you and Veronica Fabian quarrelled that morning when you met in the mews house. You lost your temper and took that knobkerrie off the wall. You swung it up over your head—"

"Like that, you mean?" He lifted the African club and as he did so all the odd pieces of the evidence came together and locked into one clear picture. Christopher Jago was innocent of the murder we had charged him with, and, from that moment, I was determined to get him off.

The case began and ended in the little house in Gissing Mews. I asked Ollie Oliphant to move the proceedings to the scene of the crime as I wished to demonstrate something to the Jury, having taken the precaution of telling my opponent that if he wanted to get his client off, he'd better support my application. So now the cold, gloomy mews house, with its primitive carvings and grinning African masks, was crammed to the gunwales with legal hacks, jury members, court officials, and all the trimmings, including, of course, Jago and the Fabians. In one way or another, as many of us as possible got a view of the hall, where I stood by the telephone impersonating, with only a momentary fear that I might have got it entirely wrong, the victim of the crime. I got Jago to stand in front of me and swing the club, P.1, again, in order to strike my head. I was not entirely surprised when neither Sam Ballard, Q.C., nor Mr. Justice Oliphant tried to prevent my apparent suicide, although Claude Erskine-Brown did have the decency to mutter, "Mind out, Rumpole. We don't want to lose you."

Everyone was watching as the tall, flamboyant accused lifted the knobkerrie and tried to swing it above his head. He tried and failed. When I was cross-examining him, I remembered the cramped rooms and low ceilings of the mews cottage. Now as the club bumped harmlessly against the plaster, everyone present understood why Jago couldn't have struck the blow that killed Veronica Fabian. Whoever killed her must have been at least six inches shorter.

It was my first prosecution and I had managed, against all the odds, to secure an acquittal.

"You got him off?"

"Yes."

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A few days, it seemed a lifetime, later, I was alone with Gregory Fabian in his white, early-Victorian house in Little Venice.

"Why?"

"Did you want an innocent man convicted? That's a stupid question. Of course you did."

He said nothing and I went on, as I had to. "You said there's always one child who needs protecting, but you weren't thinking of Veronica, were you? You were talking about your son."

"What about Roger?"

"What about him? Odd, his habit of accusing other people of the things he did himself."

"What did he do?" Gregory was quiet, unruffled, still carefully courteous, in spite of what I'd done to him.

"I think you know, don't you? The racket of undervaluing homes, so you could sell them to your secret nominees. He accused Jago of doing that, just as he accused him of Veronica's murder."

The house was very quiet. Mrs. Fabian was upstairs somewhere, resting. God knows where Roger was. Even the traffic sounded far away and muted in the darkness of an early evening in January.

"What are you trying to tell me?"

"What I think. That's all. I'm not setting out to prove anything beyond reasonable doubt."

"Go on then." He gave me a small sigh, perhaps of resignation.

"Veronica discovered what was going on and didn't like it. She asked Jago's advice, and I expect he told her to keep him well-informed. No doubt so he could make something out of it when it suited him to do so. Then I think Roger found out what his sister was doing. Well, she wasn't his real sister, was she? She was the loved girl, who had arrived after he was born, the child he was always jealous of. I expect he found out she had a date to meet Jago at the mews house. He went after her to stop her. I don't think he meant to kill her."

"Of course he didn't." The father was still trying, I thought, to persuade himself.

"He lost his temper with her. They quarrelled. She tried to telephone for help and he ripped out the phone. Remember that's how they found it. Then he took the knobkerrie off the wall. He's short enough to have been able to swing it without hitting the ceiling. But you know all that, don't you?" Gregory Fabian didn't answer, relying, I suppose, on his right to silence.

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"You wanted Roger to be safe. You wanted him to be protected, forever. And the best way of doing that was to get someone else found guilty. That's what you paid me to do. To be quite technical, Mr. Fabian, you paid me to take part in your conspiracy to pervert the course of justice."

"You said," he sounded desperately hopeful, "that you couldn't prove it . . . "

"It's not my business to prosecute. It never has been. And it's not my business to take part in crime. I told Henry to send your money back."

He stood up then and moved between me and the door. I thought for a moment that the repressed violence of the Fabians might erupt and he would attack me. But all he said was "Poor Roger."

"No, Poor Veronica. You should never have stopped her becoming a novelist."

I walked past him and out of the house. I heard him call after me, "Mr. Rumpole!" But I didn't stop. I was glad to be out in the darkness, breathing in the mist from the canal, away from a house silenced by death and deception.

I decided to walk awhile from the Fabian house, feeling I had, among other things, to think over what remained of my life. "Mr. Rumpole, although briefed for the Prosecution and under a duty to present the prosecution case to you, took it into his head, no doubt because of the habit of a lifetime, to act for the Defence. So, the basis of our fine adversarial system, which has long been our pride, has been undermined. Mr. Rumpole will have to consider where his future, if any, is at the Bar. In the absence of a prosecutor, you and I, Members of the Jury, will just have to rely on good old British common sense." These were the words with which Ollie sent the Jury out to consider its verdict, which turned out to be a resounding not guilty for everyone, except Rumpole, whose conduct had been, according to his Lordship, in his final analysis, "grossly unprofessional."

It was while I was brooding on these judicial pronouncements that I heard the sound of revelry by night and noticed that I was passing a somewhat glitzy art nouveau pub, picked out in neon lights, called the Benedict Arms. I remembered that this was the night of Christopher Jago's celebration party, to which he had invited not only his defenders, but, and in all the circumstances of the case this was understandable, the prosecution team as well. I had persuaded

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Claude not to sit moping at home and I'd promised to meet him there. Accordingly, I called into the saloon of the Benedict and was immediately told that Chris's piss-up was on the first floor.

I climbed up to a celebration very unlike our Chambers parties in Equity Court. Music, which sounded to my untrained ear very like the sound produced by a pneumatic drill pounding a pavement, shook the windows. There were a number of metallically blonde girls in skirts the size of pocket handkerchiefs and tops kept up by some stretch of the imagination and a fair number of men with moustaches, whom I took for downmarket estate agents. Like dark islands in a colorful sea, the lawyers had clearly begun, with the exception of the doleful Erskine-Brown, to enjoy the party.

"Thanks for coming." Jago stood before me. "Do you always work for the other side? If you do, I'm bloody glad I didn't have you defending me." It was the sort of joke I could do without and then, to my astonishment, I saw him put an arm around Mizz Liz Probert and say, "You know this little legal lady, I'm sure, Mr. Rumpole? I told her she can have my briefs any day of the week, quite honestly!" And I was even more astonished to see that Mizz Liz, far from kneeing this rampant chauvinist in the groin, smiled charmingly at the man she thought had been saved from a life sentence by the efforts of her co-mortgagee.

Wandering on into the throng of celebrators, I saw Ballard in close proximity to his grateful instructing solicitor, Tricia Benbow. It seemed to me that Soapy Sam had been the victim of much passive alcoholism, no doubt absorbed from the glass he held in his hand.

Then, under the sound of the pneumatic drill, I heard the shrilling of a telephone and I was hailed by Jago, who had answered it.

"Mr. Rumpole. It's your clerk. He says it's urgent."

"All right. For God's sake, turn off the music for five minutes." I took the telephone from him. "Henry!"

"I've got an awkward situation here, Mr. Rumpole. The truth of the matter is Mrs. Ballard is here."

"Oh. Bad luck."

"She happened to come out of her sprains and fractures refresher course and she wanted to meet up with her husband. She said—" Henry's voice sank to a conspiratorial murmur in which I could detect an almost irresistible tendency to laughter "—he told her he was going to a Lawyers as Christians Society meeting tonight and might be late home. But she wants to know where the meeting's being held so she can join him, if at all possible."

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"Henry, you didn't tell her he was at a piss-up in the Benedict Arms, Maida Vale?"

"No sir. I didn't think it would be well received."

"Why involve me in this sordid web of intrigue?"

"Well, we don't want to land the Head of Chambers in it, do we, Mr. Rumpole? Not in the first instance, anyway." Our clerk was positively giggling.

"Where is the wife of Ballard now?"

"She's in the waiting-room, sir."

"Put me through to her, Henry. Without delay." And when Mrs. Ballard came on the line, I greeted her warmly.

"Matey—I mean, Marguerite. This is Horace Rumpole speaking."

"Horace! Whatever are you doing there? And where's Sam?"

"Oh, I'm afraid brother Ballard can't come to the phone. He's busy preparing to induct a new member."

"A new member. Who?"

"Me."

"You, Horace?" The ex-Matron sounded incredulous.

"Of course. I have decided to put away the sins of the world and lead a better, purer life in future."

"But where are you meeting?"

"I'm afraid that can't be divulged over the telephone."

"Why ever not?"

"For your own safety I think it's better for you not to know. We've had threatening calls from militant Methodists."

"Horace. Are you sure Sam's all right? I can hear a lot of voices."

"Oh, it's a very full house this evening. Hold on a minute." I held the phone away from my ear for a while and then I told her, "Sam really can't get away now. He says he'll see you back in Waltham Cross and don't wait up for him. He'll probably be exhausted."

"Exhausted?" She sounded only a little suspicious. "Why?"

"It's the spirit," I said. "You know how it tires him."

"Is he filled with it?" Her suspicions seemed gone and her voice was full of admiration.

"Oh, yes," I assured her, "right up to the brim."

I put down the phone and the blast of road-mending music was restored. I then approached our Head of Chambers, who was standing with Dave Inchcape—Tricia, the solicitor, having danced away with her liberated client.

"That was your wife on the phone," I told him.

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"Good heavens." The man was still sober enough to panic. "She's not coming here?"

"Oh, no. I gave you a perfect alibi. Tell you about it later. I'll also tell you my solution to the Case of the Altered Brief. I'm getting into the habit of solving mysteries."

"I'd better go and find Liz." Inchcape seemed anxious to get away.

"No, you stay here, David." I spoke with some authority and the young man stood, looking anxious. "We're all but toys in the hands of women and your particular commander-in-chief is Mizz Liz Probert. I know you come into the clerk's room early to see what's arrived in the post, all white-wigs do. To your horror you found you'd been engaged by a flinty-hearted landlord to kick two ladies active in Gay Rights out of house and home. How could you face your co-habitee, if you did a case like that? It was a matter of a moment, Members of the Jury," I addressed an imaginary tribunal, "for David Inchcape to scratch out his name and write Mr. Claude Erskine-Brown in block capitals."

"Is this true?" Ballard tried his best to look judicial, although he was somewhat unsteady on his pins.

David Inchcape's silence provided the answer.

I was rather late home that evening and climbed into bed beside Hilda's sleeping back. I had no professional duties the next day and wandered into the kitchen in my dressing-gown and with a head still throbbing from the pile-driving music at Jago's celebration. I found Hilda in a surprisingly benign mood, all things considered, but I also noticed something missing from our home.

"Where's the Crock-a-Gleam?" I said. "You haven't pawned it? I know things aren't brilliant but . . . "

"I sent it back to John Lewis," Hilda told me. "We might get a little something for it."

"Why?" I felt for a chair and lowered myself slowly into it. "What's it done wrong?"

"Nothing, really. It just takes about twice as long to do the washing up as even you do, Rumpole. That's not it. It's her."

"Her?"

"Charmian Nichols. She wrote to Dodo and said Christmas with us was about as exciting as watching your finger nails grow. And when I think of what we spent on her wretched tea set. 'Charming Knickers,' that was her nickname at school. We got her completely wrong. There wasn't anything charming about her."

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"How do you know what she wrote about Christmas?"

"Dodo sent me her letter, of course. Well, after that, I couldn't sit and look at the dishwasher you bought just to please her."

Wonderfully loyal group, your old school friends, I thought of saying but decided against it. Then Hilda changed the subject.

"Rumpole," she said, "are things very bad?"

"No one wants to employ me. Not since I changed sides in the middle of a case."

"You did what you thought was right," she said, surprisingly sympathetically. But then she added, "Do be careful not to do what you think's right again. It does seem to have disastrous results."

"I can't promise you that, Hilda." I made my bid for independence. "But I can promise you one thing."

"What's that?"

"From now on, old thing, I promise you, Rumpole only defends."

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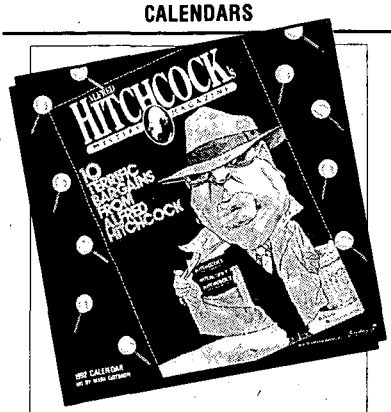
CALENDARS



Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine 1992 Calendar

Order this 1992 calendar by sending a check or money order (no cash) to:

Davis Publications
Calendars Dept..M
380 Lexington Ave.
NY, NY 10168-0035

In the US, please include price of calendar, **$9.95** (*NYC residents please add 8¼% sales tax*) plus **$2.75** for shipping and handling for the first calendar, each additional calendar add **$.50**.

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OF INTEREST TO ALL

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ORIENTAL ladies seeking correspondence, marriage. Presentations by American husband, Filipina wife. Asian Experience, Box 1214T, Novato, CA 94948. (415) 897-2742.

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NICE SINGLES with Christian values wish to meet others. FREE magazine. Send age, interests. Singles, P.O. Box 310-IO, Allardt, TN 38504.

PEARLS Of The Orient Want To Write You. Details, Photos FREE, VIDEOS AVAILABLE. (#1 In Service Since 1979.) PAL, Blanca, CO 81123-0051. (719) 379-3228.

GOOD SINGLES with Christian values!! Local/Nationwide introductions! FREE magazine! Rush age, interest. Amber, Box 232, Deer Park, NY 11729.

RUSSIA-SCANDINAVIA-POLAND, etc: Worldwide correspondence between sincere professionals (since 1980), SCANNA, POB 4-IC, Pittsford, NY 14534. (716) 586-3170.

PERSONAL—Cont'd

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SONGWRITERS

$1,200.00 CASH PRIZE. Poems Wanted For New Songs - Recordings - Publishing. Broadway Music Productions, Box 7438-DA, Sarasota, FL 34278.

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PLACE YOUR AD IN ONE OF OUR SPECIAL COMBINATIONS:
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For further information write to I. M. Bozoki, Classified Ad Manager,
Davis Publications, Inc., 380 Lexington Ave., New York, NY 10017.

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CLASSIFIED ADVERTISING ORDER FORM

Send to **ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE**
Classified Advertising Department Suite 1401
380 Lexington Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10017

15 WORD MINIMUM
Only $52.50 for 15 Words or Less
$3.50 each additional word
Capitalized words add—40¢ per word
SAVE 15% WITH 3 CONSECUTIVE MONTHS SAME COPY ORDER

DEADLINE: Copy and payment must be in by the 5th day of the third preceding month for issue in which ad is to appear.

(PLEASE PRINT OR TYPE)

YOUR NAME _____

FIRM (NAME IN AD) _____

ADDRESS _____

CITY _____ STATE _____ ZIP _____

PHONE: _____ DATE: _____

YOUR SIGNATURE _____

_____ Words at $3.50 each $ _____

_____ Capitalized word at 40¢ each _____

Total amount for 1 ad $ _____

15% Savings with 3 Consecutive Months Discount

(a) Multiply one ad total $_____ x 3 = $ _____

(b) Multiply total amount on above line by x .85

(c) Total amount for 3 ads $ _____

(Example: One 15 word ad $52.50 x 3 months = $157.50 x .85 = $133.87)

$_____ is enclosed for _____ insertion(s) in the _____ issue(s) _____ Heading

(FOR ADDITIONAL WORDS ATTACH SEPARATE SHEET)

(1) **$52.50**	(2) **$52.50**	(3) **$52.50**	(4) **$52.50**	(5) **$52.50**
(6) **$52.50**	(7) **$52.50**	(8) **$52.50**	(9) **$52.50**	(10) **$52.50**
(11) **$52.50**	(12) **$52.50**	(13) **$52.50**	(14) **$52.50**	(15) **$52.50**
(16) **$56.00**	(17) **$59.50**	(18) **$63.00**	(19) **$66.50**	(20) **$70.00**
(21) **$73.50**	(22) **$77.00**	(23) **$80.50**	(24) **$84.00**	(25) **$87.50**
(26) **$91.00**	(27) **$94.50**	(28) **$98.00**	(29) **$101.50**	(30) **$105.00**

HOW TO COUNT WORDS: Name and address must be included in counting the number of Words in your ad. Each initial or number counts as 1 word. Mark Holly, 380 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10017. 7 WORDS. Zip codes are not counted. Phone # 2 Words. Symbols used as keys are charged for. City or State count as 1 word each. Garden City, New York, 2 words. Abbreviations such as C O D, F O B, PO, U S A, 7x10, 35mm count as 1 word (PO Box 145 count as 3 words). Websters International Unabridged Dictionary will be used as our authority for spelling compound words, hyphens, abbreviations, etc. **Please make checks payable to ELLERY QUEEN MAGAZINE.**

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NEXT ISSUE...

10 stories—including

The Last High Mountain by CLARK HOWARD
Scrabble Babble Dabble by H. R. F. KEATING
The Man in Her Life by ROBERT BARNARD
Dark Possessions by JAMES POWELL

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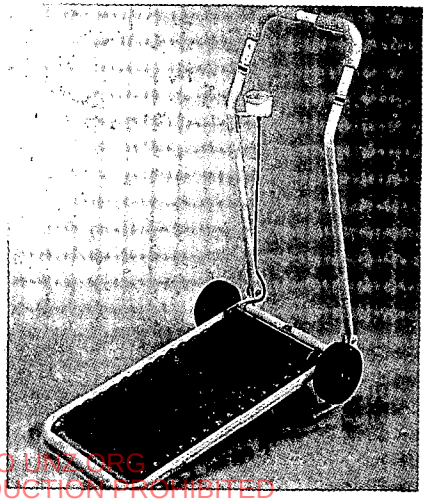
MAIL ★ ORDER ★ MALL

▼ CUTLERY: A CUT ABOVE THE REST

The secret behind Regent Scheffield's new Laser 2000's cutlery is the unique machined edge guaranteed to stay super sharp for 25 years — without sharpening! The result is a knife so sharp and durable that it comes with an unmatched guarantee: If a Laser 2000 knife ever dulls, chips, rusts, or breaks during the next 25 years, Regent Sheffield will replace it FREE! Plus, the Laser 2000's blades have a unique nonstick Xylan coating, so slicing even hard vegetables is a snap. And clean-up is a cinch because food doesn't stick to the blades. Unbreakable, dishwasher-safe handles are contoured to fit your hand comfortably. A lovely sleek wood block holds the entire 5 piece set: bread knife, carving knife, cook's knife, utility knife, and paring knife. **$129.98** ($7.00) #A1933.

▼ FOLDAWAY EXERTRACK™



Staying in shape is vital for our health and well being with today's lifestyle. Getting to the gym may not always be easy in our busy lives. We have just the answer for all you people on the go or just for the ones who enjoy to get fit at home. That's why the Foldaway Exertrack is the perfect way to exercise. This personal treadmill has a speedometer/odometer to monitor speed and progress. It measures 38"x21"x3" and features a safe rubber track and an adjustable handlebar that faces forward or backward for running and walking comfort. No electrical connections or motors needed. Exercise has never been simpler. Order one today and get on the right track with the Exertrack. Folds away for easy storage, lightweight and compact. At a great price! **$131.98** ($15.00) #A1977.

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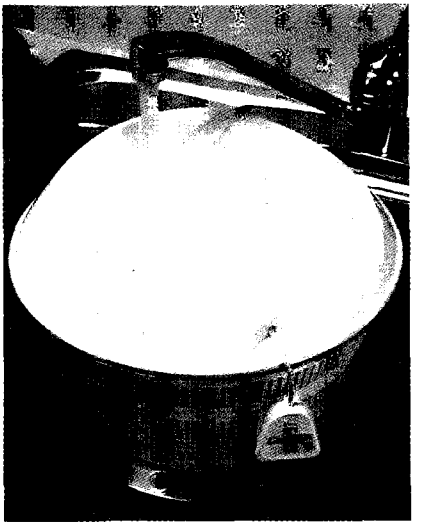
▼ EVERYTHING BAG

People on the go always have so much to carry around. The Everything Bag makes it a snap. This oversized shoulder bag is constructed of tough, water-resistant canvas material and features nine roomy pockets. Plus, an unusual zipper design enables the bag to expand to double its normal width—to a full eight inches. Adjustable 2" wide straps provides a real comfort feature. In 3 great colors. **$24.98** ($4.00) #A1955-Blue; #A1956-Khaki, #A1957-Gray.

▼ FOOD FOR WOOD

Most of the convenience waxes you buy actually dry out wood instead of nourishing it. What's the alternative? Our choice is Williamsville Wax. It is made of beeswax and lemon oil, heat-blended with other natural oils. It can be used on any type of wood, any type of finish, on paneling or kitchen cabinets as well as fine furniture. Williamsville Wax is super for restoring neglected or mistreated wood. Two 8-oz. bottles cost **$13.98** ($3.25) #A14312.

▼ SPIN WASH, SPIN DRY



The Jet Spin Washer/Dryer for salad greens and vegetables, does a better job with less effort than any other method of preparation. As the stream of water hits the spinning inner basket, it bursts into spray, giving the contents a good drenching before being carried off by centrifugal action. Flywheel action keeps basket spinning with only a few gentle tugs. Spray wash coaxes dirt and grit from innermost lettuce wrinkles. Turn off the faucet and with a few more tugs the remaining water spins away, leaving you with crisp clean salad greens, so dry they are positively perky. Also works for fruits and vegetables. The Jet Salad Washer/Dryer is self-draining, splashfree. **$19.98** ($4.50) #A1520.

TO ORDER: Send check with item number for total amounts, plus shipping & handling shown in ( ) payable to **MAIL ORDER MALL**, Dept. 012 EL, P.O. Box 3006, Lakewood, N.J. 08701, or call TOLL FREE **1-800-722-9999**. NJ residents add 6% sales tax. We honor MasterCard/Visa. Sorry, no Canadian, foreign, or C.O.D. orders. Satisfaction Guaranteed. 30 day money back guarantee for exchange or refund. Allow 30 days for delivery.

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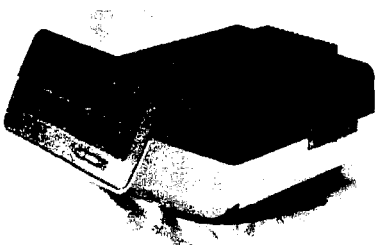
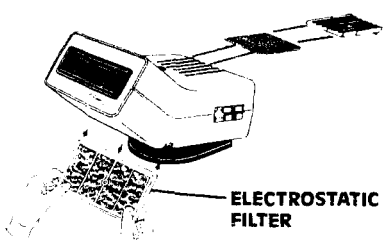
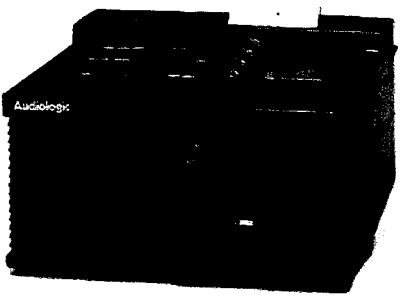
▼ BREATHE EASIER WITH THE AIR PROCESSOR

Clean air is vital to overall good health and general well-being and there is growing concern about the quality of the air around us. Amcor's Air Processor is uniquely designed to remove indoor air pollution and improve air quality. This compact unit has a high voltage generator that produces negatively charged ions that clean the air of cigarette/cigar smoke, dust, pollen, fungal and bacterial particles as well as a host of other allergy stimuli. The Air Processor also features a blower for air circulation and a unique filter that is permanent and washable. Includes a free Ionoscope that detects the negative ions emitted from the ion generator and proves that it is functioning. Very quiet so it is perfect for any room in your house. UL listed. **$99.98** ($6.50) #A2002.





▼ SLEEP SOUNDLY WITH SOUND SLEEPER



Is noise pollution interfering with your ability to get a good night's sleep? If so, then the Sound Sleeper by Audiologic is the clock radio of your dreams. Sound Sleeper combines a state of the art AM/FM cassette clock radio with the benefits of natural sound conditioning. Sound Sleeper lets you fall asleep to the sounds of ocean surf, rushing waterfalls and/or rainfall with the flip of a switch. After a relaxing night's sleep, wake up with a buzzer or music from the radio or cassette. So why have an ordinary clock radio when you can have the cassette clock radio that not only wakes you up but also lulls you to sleep! **$89.98** ($5.50) #A2000.

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